



小説

藤崎都

Fujisaki To

原作&
まんが

中村春菊

Haruhiko Nakamura

横澤隆史の場合3

世界一初恋

セカイイチハツコイ

角川ルビ一文庫



Title: *Sekai-ichi Hatsukoi ~ The Case of Yokozawa Takafumi 3*

Author: Fujisaki Miyako (**original work:** Nakamura Shungiku)

Translator: fencer_x of *September Scanlations*

Short Story 3

Adjusting his grip on the plastic bag he held with both hands, Yokozawa Takafumi stepped off the elevator onto the 5th floor, on which were situated the *shounen* and *seinen* manga editing departments of Marukawa Shoten's main offices.

While the lights almost never seemed to dim on this floor-that-never-sleeps, the reason there were a particularly large number of people still hanging back tonight was because this was the final day of the cycle—and from the looks of things, this was going to be yet another long night.

Yokozawa called out to Hitomi, who passed dazedly just in front of him. "Great work today; how are things looking?"

"Huh? Yokozawa-san? Didn't you just head home earlier?" The workplace being perhaps the cause of his vacant expression, Hitomi seemed more shocked than expected at Yokozawa's sudden reappearance, appearing as if he'd just been jolted awake.

"I brought some snacks."

"Seriously?! Thank you so much! I was just thinking that I was *crazy* hungry!" Hitomi peered into the plastic bag curiously, his expression seeming to positively dance with glee. Yokozawa had bought *gyuudon*—the late hour had meant that a chain restaurant had been the only place close by that could prepare an order for a large number of people decently quickly. "Kirishima-san! Yokozawa-san brought us all some dinner, so how about taking a short break?"

Kirishima Zen, Editor-in-Chief of *Japun*, had been staring grim-faced down at his desk as he worked—and he now glanced up at Hitomi's comment. Catching sight of Yokozawa here, he hazarded, "What're you doing here, Yokozawa? Didn't you already head home?"

Yokozawa felt a swell of irritation when Kirishima asked him the same thing Hitomi had, as if he didn't know fully well the reason Yokozawa was here now. "*You*... Who the hell was it who called me up after I'd already gone through the ticket gates at the station whining that he was hungry?!"

It wasn't as if he hadn't been annoyed at what had seemed like a prank call initially, but he'd wound up coming back here regardless, dinner in hand, because he'd felt pity for the guy not having anything to eat this evening.

“Oh, that... I was just venting because I was hungry, that’s all.”

Yokozawa snapped at the casual manner with which Kirishima delivered his response, and he immediately regretted feeling the remotest bit of sympathy for the guy. “Know what? *You get no dinner now*. Katou—you can have two servings instead.”

On hearing this news, Katou—who’d been milling about picking at the *gyuudon* containers—glanced back and forth in confusion between Yokozawa and Kirishima. “Eeh?! Wait, even if you tell me I can, I still...”

“Whatever—I’m leaving now.” With sore feelings, Yokozawa turned on his heel and headed back toward the elevator—when Kirishima burst into a jog to chase him down.

“Ah—wait, I’m getting on too.”

“What the hell are—don’t follow me!”

“I’m just going to get a drink, geez; it’s not like I’m following you on purpose.”

“Then—get one from the vending machine right over there!”

“What’s it matter what floor I buy my drink on?”

“.....”

The pair boarded the elevator in silence, and as Yokozawa worked to hide his discomfort with a serious mien, Kirishima dipped to the side and gently bumped their shoulders together.

“Thanks. For the meal.”

“...It was just a whim.”

It felt awkward, having Kirishima thank him properly like this, leaving Yokozawa with a complicated mess of feelings at how narrow-minded he’d been for getting so worked up over a simple casual remark.

“I never actually *thought* you’d come back—so I was just...really happy. ”

“That’s because you always do confusing shit like this!”

“Well it’s gonna be an all-nighter here tonight. I just wanted to hear your voice a little.”

“You idiot—stop behaving like a child.”

“Yeah yeah, I’m sorry~”

Their comfortable conversation was slowly settling his feelings again, and with Kirishima so honestly sharing his intentions, all desire to stay angry was melting away. No matter the age, everyone had their moments where they just wanted to be needy with someone else. Children often misbehaved on purpose, rousing their parents’ ire, with full faith and trust that they were loved above all else. Perhaps Kirishima’s own teasing in this way was how he showed his affection.

As Yokozawa reflected on how childish he’d behaved, he caught Kirishima softly calling his name. “...Yokozawa.”

“Huh?” Glancing over at the sudden comment, the space before his eyes darkened, and something soft brushed over his lips, wiping his mind blank.

“Charging complete~”

It took a moment to process what had just happened, but everything came together when he took in Kirishima’s smile staring back at him from point-blank range. “What—the *hell* are you thinking, at *work*?!”

“‘S your fault for letting your guard down.”

“Don’t try to pass the blame, asshole!” At the moment he raised his voice, though, the elevator doors opened, and Yokozawa breathed a sigh of relief that no one had boarded on their way down. If someone had spotted them...he’d never be able to show his face in this office again.

The lights on the first floor had already been doused, with only the way leading toward the rear night entrance dimly lit. Thankfully, it seemed the security team were off on their rounds, leaving no one around to catch sight of them.

As Yokozawa headed toward the rear entrance, for some reason, Kirishima turned in the same direction—despite the fact that there wasn’t a single vending machine on this side of the building. Drawing up short before he reached the exit, Yokozawa bit out, “There’s no vending machines this way! What the hell’re you following me for?”

Kirishima grinned back coolly, “Seeing you off, of course.”

“Idi—don’t treat me like a *kid*.”

“Geez you’re thick—I’m treating you like a *lover*.”

“...!!”

Flushing deeply and groping for something to say, Yokozawa realized this must have been what they meant with the phrase *at a loss for words*. He felt filled not so much with embarrassment as sheer *frustration*.

“G’night. Take care going home.”

Somehow gathering his wits about him again, Yokozawa returned, “Just—hurry up and finish your cycle and get your ass home,” and casually plodded on toward the exit, stepping out into the night air. The evening breeze felt chillier than it had earlier—maybe because his face felt like it was on fire.

“*Shit...*just you wait...” he muttered to himself before breaking into a jog headed for the station.

Short Story 4

“Thank you so much for everything, Saegusa-san. I hope we’ll have a great working relationship in our future business ventures together.”

“Not at all—I hope for the same! Thanks so much for your help in ensuring this fair goes well!!”

At Yokozawa’s formal bow, Saegusa of Animate bowed even deeper. Today, he’d dropped by the newly opened Ikebukuro branch of Animate to have a look around, having Saegusa show him where the Marukawa Shoten shelves were located. It seemed there was even a special space set aside for holding campaign events, and there was no doubt it would soon be bustling with customers.

Given that much of the merchandise had yet to be lined up on the shelves, the store had something of an empty feeling to it, but as soon as the goods and books were all put in place, it was sure to be a lively place.

“Well then, as soon as we’ve put the particulars together, I’ll be sure to contact you again.”

“Of course! I’ll be waiting with bells on!”

Giving his thanks once more to Saegusa, who flashed him a friendly smile, Yokozawa turned his gaze to outside the building—only to notice the passersby all running panickedly and hastening to open their umbrellas.

“Uh oh—looks like a shower’s started up! But the forecast said it wasn’t supposed to start until late this evening... Did you bring an umbrella, Yokozawa-san?”

“It’s not too terrible just yet; I’m sure I can make it back to the station all right if I make a run for it.”

“Are you sure?”

While the office had plenty of umbrellas lying around for employees to use at their convenience, Yokozawa had cockily assumed he’d be able to head home before it started to rain, and so his own umbrellas was still sitting by his desk at work.

He didn’t exactly have many good memories associated with stormy days. He hated the gloomy atmosphere, and he lacked any sensitivity to appreciate the elegance of the sound of the falling rain.

“If it looks like it’s getting worse, I’ll just buy a cheap one from a convenience store along the way.” So long as the documents in his briefcase didn’t get soaked, everything was fine. There was always the option to find someplace to hole himself up in until the weather cleared, but he had plans after this and couldn’t exactly dawdle for very long.

Just as he’d tucked his bag under one arm and moved to exit the shop, a man named Tezuka, in charge of merchandise at Animate, appeared—perhaps here to assess how things were going with the new shop before it opened.

“Huh? Yokozawa-san?”

“Tezuka-san...” Yokozawa had been working with this man since around the time he’d first been assigned to comics sales.

“Are you heading home already? I’m terribly sorry—if I’d known you were here, I would have come out sooner!”

“Oh no, please don’t mind me—I was just about to head out, but then this shower started and I was trying to figure out how to deal with it.”

“Do you...not have an umbrella?”

“I seem to have underestimated the weather. It can’t be helped, though, I suppose!”

At Yokozawa’s explanation of the situation, though, Tezuka held out the fold-up umbrella he’d just finished wrapping up. “Then—please, take this. I just used it, though, so my apologies that it’s already wet.”

“Thank you—but I’m sure I’ll be fine even without an umbrella. The station really isn’t that far away.”

“What’re you saying? I can’t possibly let you catch a cold, Yokozawa-san! Plus, it’s getting worse out there.” Indeed, while it had only been lightly drizzling before, the rain had now turned into a full-fledged shower. Although hardly an actual storm, it was weather reminiscent of the summer rainy season nonetheless.

“But—if I take your umbrella, you won’t have one of your own. What’ll you do when you leave?”

“I’m sure it’ll be stopped by the time I’m ready to head home myself, so I’ll be fine. And even if it hasn’t stopped, I’ll just borrow Saegusa’s.”

At Tezuka’s declaration, Saegusa returned a panicked, “Huh?! But—then what am I supposed to do?”

“You can just have your girlfriend come and pick you up.”

“Wait—hey, don’t suggest things like that, please!”

“So—there you have it! Feel free to use my umbrella then.”

“Well...then I suppose I’ll take you up on your offer. I’ll be sure to return it the next time I’m here.” After some hesitation, Yokozawa decided to accept the umbrella with his thanks. The rain didn’t seem to be letting up, after all, and being too stubborn in his refusal to accept the offer would in itself be rude.

Thanking them for their kindness, he promised once more to return the umbrella at a later point in time and left the new Ikebukuro branch of Animate, headed for a fast food restaurant near the west exit of Ikebukuro Station.

Tonight, he was supposed to meet up with Kirishima and head out for drinks together—apparently at some bar specializing in serving German beer, where apparently Kirishima had once been taken by a work acquaintance and found the fare to be delicious.

Kirishima had initially offered to come meet him at Animate, but Yokozawa had turned the offer down flat—it would have been a nightmare to find himself teased in front of work associates. It was bad enough being the subject of ridicule amongst coworkers in the office like this, but there was no doubt in Yokozawa’s mind that anyone who had no prior notice of their workplace relationship would find how they behaved highly suspicious.

Following the crowd, he made his way through the station and glanced into the fast food shop they were to meet at, finding Kirishima already seated at the counter by the window, nursing a coffee. Female passersby periodically cast curious glances his way, but the man himself didn't seem to notice a bit.

"Were you waiting long?"

"Not really. I'm gonna finish this up—wait just a minute."

"Don't rush; I'll be waiting right outside." Hesitating to just pull up a seat without buying anything, Yokozawa stepped back outside. As expected, the rain showed no signs of stopping, so it had been a good idea to go ahead and accept the umbrella.

He'd done some research on the bar they were going to before leaving work earlier, only to find it was a bit of a walk from the nearest station. Had the skies been clear, this wouldn't have been much of an ordeal, but with this storm settling in, it was bound to feel like quite a hike.

"Sorry for the wai—ah, *dammit*. You brought an umbrella?" Kirishima's face fell the moment he stepped out of the shop—or to be more precise, the moment Yokozawa was opening his umbrella.

"Oh, this? Tezuka-san from Animate let me borrow it."

At Yokozawa's response, Kirishima whined, "Why'd you have to go and borrow one? Geez, you can be so *thick* sometimes."

"...? I don't understand a word you're saying." It was baffling why Kirishima would attack him for something like borrowing an umbrella.

At Yokozawa's confusion, Kirishima clarified petulantly, "I went out of my way and bought this huge umbrella just so we could huddle under it together!"

"You *what*?"

"You have to jump on these opportunities like the weather forecast being wrong whenever you can, right? This way, everyone around us will just assume we got caught in the sudden downpour and only had one umbrella between us."

Yokozawa gaped in bewilderment at Kirishima's attempt to explain his logic. The guy was free to justify things however he liked, but Yokozawa would really have appreciated if he'd *stop* treating these far-fetched notions as perfectly reasonable assumptions. After one long sigh, he decided to make his own feelings clear, just in case: "Just as a reminder: I have *no* intention of sharing an umbrella with you."

It was embarrassing enough to just *say* the words ‘sharing an umbrella’—so there was no way in *hell* was going to actually *do* it. Much as he understood Kirishima’s intention, it was another matter entirely to *agree* to go along with it.

“C’mon, what’ll it hurt? Just for a little bit?”

“Abso. Lutely. Not.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m sure having a *hell* of a lot of fun telling you *no*.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, come on!”

“...Sometimes I wonder just what you have inside that head of yours.” It was downright frustrating how at times they didn’t seem to understand what the other was saying. Sometimes he’d assume Kirishima was joking when he’d actually been serious, and at other times, Yokozawa would rage at him for saying something that eventually turned out to have only been said in jest. Even to this day, it was difficult to differentiate between the two.

“Nothing but thoughts of you, of course.”

“All right, all right, enough with the flirting—let’s get going. You didn’t reserve us seats, right?” Smoothly side-stepping the innuendo, Yokozawa stepped back out into the rain alone. Thankfully, the shower had let up just a bit since before.

“Hey—wait for me, dammit! You trying to leave me behind? Yokozawa!”

He paused to turn and throw a cool glance over his shoulder before facing front again. “If you don’t wanna get left behind, then you’d better snap it up and come with me.”

But it seemed his poker face wasn’t going to last any longer than that, and praying that his flushed cheeks would cool before Kirishima caught up with him, he stepped up his pace to buy himself as much time as possible.

The Case of Yokozawa Takafumi 3 ~ Chapter 4

“Wooow, it sure is crowded!” Kirishima Hiyori commented in awe at the crowd as soon as she stepped foot into the theater.

Pamphlet, drinks, and popcorn in hand, the three found their theater—the one with the most seats in the whole complex—almost completely full when they walked inside. Perhaps because most elementary and middle school students were on summer break right now, many of the audience seemed to be families or friends coming together.

Yokozawa Takafumi sauntered up the aisle, checking the number on their tickets against the plates along the back of the seats to find where they would be sitting.

“Pretty crowded, huh...” Kirishima Zen commented in admiration, gaze flicking around the theater.

“Well, it *is* a pretty popular flick—plus it’s summer vacation, and a weekend to boot. Ah—our seats are right over there. Hiyo, you sit on the aisle; you’ll have a better view from there.”

“You don’t mind?”

“We’re pretty big boys; we can see from anywhere.”

“Thanks, Oniichan!”

Yokozawa had reserved three seats in from the central aisle. Setting their drinks in the respective drink-holders, they settled into their seats, with Yokozawa furthers from the aisle.

“Hiyo—you sure you don’t need to go to the bathroom before the show starts?”

At Kirishima’s suggestion, Hiyori stood again, flustered. “Oh, yeah! I’ll hurry back, then!”

The movie they’d come to see today was a foreign action flick rather popular at the moment. Pre-release talk shows had touted it as a movie well worth the price of admission, with cool superheroes and an air of exhilaration. Perhaps due to Kirishima’s influence, Hiyori seemed to prefer shounen manga to shoujo manga, and while she did occasionally read romance manga, the ones she tended to re-read over and over again were largely shounen titles.

“Good thing we reserved these tickets in advance, huh? I never would’ve thought it’d be this crowded.” Kirishima had been surprised as well at the turnout—the one who’d forced him to rethink the initial haphazard plan and actually reserve tickets

had been Yokozawa, and he'd explicitly chosen seats Hiyori was sure to have the best view from via the online internet reservation system.

"Didn't I tell you? Still—it's been a while since I've been to a movie theater..." Even when there'd been a title that looked interesting running in theaters, he'd always been swamped with work and the run had ended before he could see it. Movies he *really* wanted to see, he rented later to watch at home, but there were many titles he really would've preferred seeing in the theater itself. Watching a movie while relaxing at home was all well and good, but flashy action flicks were always better in the theater. The impact watching on a huge screen was completely different, and you could feel the sound in your very bones—plus, he loved the buildup of excitement when the lights started to go down, just before the movie itself started.

It was enjoyable enough chatting back and forth about a movie while watching it, but discussing the movie in depth *after* watching it, recalling all of the great scenes, was just as much fun. He'd gone to cheap 'late shows' quite a bit in his youth, and there'd even been a time where all he'd watched were minor foreign films that only played in arthouses.

"Yeah, I guess it's been a while for me, too... I used to come see anime films a lot with Hiyori when she was younger, though."

"What, like magical girl stuff?"

"Yeah, that—but before I knew it, we wound up not going as much anymore. Maybe I've been making her hold back... This was actually the first time in a while that she said she wanted to see something of her own free will."

"Maybe there just haven't been any titles out lately that she's wanted to see? She seems happy enough to be here to me." Perhaps she *had* been holding back, given how busy Kirishima was with work; or maybe she'd just graduated from movies geared toward children—only Hiyori herself could tell for sure, but there was no reason for Kirishima to worry about it right now.

"...I guess you're right."

Yokozawa knew fully well that Kirishima felt bad whenever he considered that his daughter might be holding herself back because of him—which was perhaps why he'd gone to the effort to drag them all out to this movie on their day off.

While he doubted that Hiyori hadn't been feeling at least a little lonely, he felt he had a pretty good grasp on how her father was feeling. Perhaps that was how he'd been able to raise such a straightforward, kind daughter.

While both father and daughter had their awkward, tactless moments, the way they cared for others was admirable—though given how embarrassing it would be to admit as such, Yokozawa never intended to let them know this.

"Mind if I check out the pamphlet?"

"Sure." Kirishima passed the pamphlet to Yokozawa, and he flipped through the booklet. He typically only reviewed these kinds of things *after* a show, so as not to spoil anything for himself, but it was already pretty clear who the good and bad guys were in this movie.

Scanning the character introductions to acquaint himself with the cast, Kirishima began to pepper him with questions. "Want some popcorn?"

"I'll eat some later."

"Mind if I try what you're drinking?"

"Have at it."

"Ooh, this is pretty good—want to try some of mine?"

"Not really—and what's with you? You're all worked up!" Yokozawa finally snapped at the way Kirishima kept overtly engaging him in conversation—thankfully, while Hiyori was still away. If she'd been here and caught them bickering like this, she would've undoubtedly given a long-suffering sigh of, "Honestly, you two are so immature!"

"It's just...sitting here like this—it's kinda like a date."

"...God you're an idiot." The guy simply seemed to be in uncharacteristic high spirits, and Yokozawa found himself at a loss for words in shock. He tried to ignore Kirishima and dive back into his pamphlet—when the lights dimmed by half.

Wondering where Hiyori was and why she wasn't back yet, Yokozawa twisted in place to check the rear entrance—just in time to catch her jogging down the steps

back to where they sat. Perhaps the bathrooms had been just as crowded as the theater itself.

“I’m back~! I got scared when I came back inside and saw it was dark—thought it had already started!”

“They’ll still be playing commercials and previews for a while yet, so you’re fine. Be careful not to spill your drink.”

“Do you not need to go, Papa?”

“I went earlier, so I’m fine.”

Thank goodness Hiyori came back when she did; Kirishima was the type to put on airs around his daughter, so he could be trusted not to say anything stupid in front of her.

But the moment he let his guard down, the lights dimmed further and plunged the theater into darkness—and Yokozawa found his hand gripped in another.

“?!”

He jerked his hand back in shock, but after a moment, he found it gripped again—and when Kirishima tried to thread their fingers together this time, he hissed in sharp warning, “Don’t get cocky!” and slapped his palm away.

That was what he got, he supposed, for praising the guy in his mind earlier.

“Damn, no dice?”

“*Hell* no.” Dark as it might have been, they were in the middle of a huge crowd and his daughter was *right there*—Kirishima could stand to practice a little self-restraint. And more to the point—it wasn’t in Yokozawa’s nature to hold hands, an action so embarrassing he couldn’t just sit there and silently let it happen.

“Hey you two—no talking during the movie!” Hiyori scolded when Yokozawa berated Kirishima for making a pass at him.

“Sorry sorry, we won’t do it again.”

It was horribly awkward, feeling like they’d just been caught flirting—but while Yokozawa would have liked to explain himself, the movie seemed about to start, and

he bit back his words. In return, he satisfied himself with lightly kicking Kirishima's leg in frustration.

This only seemed to amuse the guy even further, though, for when he hazarded a glance to the side, Kirishima's grin had widened substantially—he couldn't let himself get any further involved in this. He reluctantly settled for crossing his arms over his chest, glaring up at the screen as the previews started playing.

The sensation of Kirishima's fingers on his hand lingered vividly, and the harder he tried to forget, the less he was able to tamp down his irritation at failing to wash from his memory the movements of those fingers.

It goes without saying that Yokozawa couldn't concentrate through the entire movie.

The Case of Yokozawa Takafumi 3 ~ Chapter 5

Today's meeting to discuss sales policies had everyone on edge from the outset. Despite the air conditioner being on a low setting for purposes of energy conservation, the air still carried a chill to it, and with most everyone holding their tongues in this tense situation, the only one still continuing to deliver a thorough tongue-lashing was Kirishima Zen, editor-in-chief of *Monthly Japun*.

"This whole mess is all *you people's* fault, so make up your damn minds—I'm sure this is just one measly work out of thousands to the company, but to the authors themselves, each and every piece they put out is a battle. Take things more seriously!"

All present were far too frightened to even look Kirishima squarely in the eye as he chewed them out. Perhaps because of how composed he usually kept himself, when he let his expression fall away, the guy was like *ice*—so much so that even Yokozawa was breaking out into a cold sweat, which meant that the others were surely shaking in their shoes.

Taking up his mantle as representative of the sales department, Yokozawa bowed his head low. "...We *deeply* apologize." The entire reason that Yokozawa, widely known throughout Marukawa Shoten as the 'Wild Bear', was on the defensive from the get-go was simply because the blame lay entirely on the sales department's shoulders.

They'd just realized their incredibly huge mistake only yesterday—several days earlier, an employee who'd been suddenly transferred to an affiliate corporation was apparently backed up with work. Given that everything that employee was involved with were issues that had needed to be handled long before, Yokozawa and the rest of his team had found themselves having to care of a mountain of post-processing.

Naturally, this wasn't due to any error by Yokozawa himself—but nevertheless, the sales department's ineptitude had clearly dropped the ball on this one, bringing down the entire department together.

To make matters worse, the head of the sales department had gone on vacation abroad the previous week, and as a result, despite there still being other sales department members superior to Yokozawa around, Yokozawa was the one in charge of comics sales and had therefore found himself shoved to the forefront of the battle.

They likely suspected that, given how close the two seemed to be, they might get off relatively lightly, but Kirishima wasn't the type to lessen his attacks for something as simple as that.

"I don't suppose there's any use crying over spilled milk—so rather than reflecting on the mess you've made, focus on *fixing it*. For the time being, bring me a revised version of the sales policies by the end of the day."

Doubting his hearing, Yokozawa turned the question on the man across the table. "By the end...of *today*?" It was next to impossible to completely review from the bottom up in half a day a series of sales policies that it had taken *months* to compile in the first place. And more so—there were more than a few matters they still had to take care of to correct the errors that had been made.

"You heard me. If we don't get things in order by the time the new volumes are released, then there's no point to this at all."

At Kirishima's frustratingly logical argument, the associates to Yokozawa's left and right quailed, holding their breath.

"...I'll take care of it, then." Had this been an issue with himself, Yokozawa would have continued to exchange caustic words with Kirishima, but in an effort to save face, he had little choice but to duck his head and give in. He'd been shoved into the limelight like this with pleas from those around him not to make matters worse,

leaving Yokozawa aching with frustration over having no choice other than to offer his half-hearted response.



"What the hell's with that vague response? If you're so 'busy' you can't even take a few days' vacation, you should have no problem taking care of this, right? You're married to your work after all, aren't you?" Kirishima pressed, watching Yokozawa swallow uncomfortably.

".....!"

"I'm asking *you*, personally. Can you do it—or can't you? Which is it?"

"...All right then. I'll be sure to have it to you by the end of the day, without fail," he eventually relented, hands gripped into tight fists at his sides. His coworkers furtively released their collective breath, but this was a matter of personal pride on Yokozawa's part now. There might be complaints later, but all he had to do was make sure to take personal responsibility now.

Plus—Kirishima wasn't the type of man to make impossible demands. The very reason he was being so persistent on this matter likely had to do with the fact that it was Yokozawa sitting across the table from him.

Besides—Kirishima was right in this matter; if they didn't make their move either today or tomorrow, the company would experience a significant loss.

Had the employee at fault been one of Yokozawa's subordinates, this sort of stupid mistake would never have occurred in the first place—but he couldn't go about bad-mouthing the errors of a superior for one thing, and for another, the person at fault had previously shown himself to be rather proficient at his job.

Given his impressive ability to spin a conversation, though, most everything around him was enveloped in a hazy smoke. It had only been recently that it had come to light that he'd been pushing off his work onto unsuspecting newbies on the side, playing up everything as his own doing. On top of that, there were rumors of financial discrepancies as well.

Yokozawa and his group hadn't been made aware of why the man had been transferred, but it likely had to do with a pile-up of such incidents. Really, they were actually *late* to realize all that had been going on, and regrets of *if only we'd realized sooner* simply strengthened as more came to light.

Yokozawa had commended himself for rising through the ranks to take on responsibilities overseeing comics sales over someone above him in both age and years employed at the company—but considering everything now, he couldn't

discount the possibility that his superiors had simply realized that these duties couldn't be entrusted to that man.

The moment the meeting ended, everyone scattered like spiderlings, likely eager to remove themselves from this atmosphere as quickly as possible. Yokozawa would have liked to have done the same, but he still had a piece of his mind to give Kirishima.

With a glance to ensure that they were alone in the meeting room now, he called out, "Kirishima-san," to the man still seated across from him.

"Hm?"

"A word, if you don't mind?" Despite having already ensured that the door was shut, he kept his voice low in case anyone was still dawdling outside the room. He absolutely could not have anyone else in the office overhearing the conversation they were about to have. Taking a small breath, he hazarded, "I really...am sorry for this issue happening, and you're perfectly within your rights to berate me for it—but I'll thank you not to bring your personal issues with me into the meeting room."

"Ah, so you noticed, did you?" Kirishima scratched the back of his neck almost purposefully, shifting his gaze off to the side. His expression now showed absolutely none of the cold indifference he'd worn only moments before, and feeling a sense of relief at this fact, Yokozawa allowed himself to release a sigh.

"Like hell I'd miss it." Thankfully, it seemed no one else in the room had noticed, but Yokozawa had fully grasped the subtle jab Kirishima had delivered.

The whole *married to your work* ridicule had likely been targeted in response to Yokozawa arguing just the previous day that it would be difficult for him to manage to take a few days off together.

Several years prior, Marukawa Shoten had instated a system where one had to submit an application in advance to be able to take vacation time, with everyone submitting their desired days off and subsequently being notified of their fixed vacation interval. Kirishima had suggested that they align their days off and go on a family trip together, but Yokozawa had no clue when he'd be able to tear himself away from the work he was dealing with right now, so he'd had to turn the guy down for the time being.

Yokozawa had taken over much of the responsibilities that the transferred employee had been in charge of, and there was little hope of him being able to put everything in order in only a few days. Plus, when they'd visited the matter of taking a vacation yesterday, they still hadn't even learned about the issue they'd just been discussing in the meeting only moments before.

"Well, you look so *cute* when you're in trouble—I couldn't help myself."

"Don't think you're getting off with 'I couldn't help myself!'"

Of course, the only reason Yokozawa was able to have such a frank discussion with someone who was technically his superior was purely because of the secret relationship they were currently engaged in. While he hadn't confessed as such to a single soul, certain matters had led to the two dating for the past few months, and despite being unable to shake the sensation of how unbelievable their situation was, it was nevertheless the unadorned truth.

"It's your fault for being so cold~" Kirishima pouted when Yokozawa unthinkingly raised his voice, and the unbecoming expression only served to further irritate.

It was likely that no one had ever entertained the notion that the charismatic editor-in-chief who managed to control his brigade of individualistic editors could behave in such a childish manner—and Yokozawa had lost count of how many times he'd wished he could just snap a picture and flash it about the office to prove as such.

With a fit body and height enough to him to compete with Yokozawa's 180-plus centimeters, no one could dispute how handsome he was. He had a calm atmosphere about him exceeding his 30-some-odd years of age, and the voice issuing forth from his slender lips was beautiful with its low, gentle timbre.

However, while he remained forever unruffled despite what troubles cropped up in his work, he exhibited a surprisingly wide range of emotions in private—so clumsy he couldn't even peel the skin off an apple, and yet prone to intense jealousy as well. Perhaps the only ones privy to that side of Kirishima were his family and Yokozawa.

"And it's not like I could help any of this—after flailing about the way we did yesterday over this matter, if I don't handle it, you'll be the one catching hell for it."

"Work and play are separate matters."

"Says the guy who just mixed them *superbly* five minutes ago?"

“Did I...?”

“...Geez, *you*...” Yokozawa’s brows furrowed deeply at Kirishima’s insistent, illogical quibbling, and he massaged his temples.

The issue at hand had come to light just as the pair had been heading home the previous evening, right as they’d been discussing the matter of taking vacation time for their trip. Yokozawa had had little choice but to turn down the invitation, leaving Kirishima in a foul mood.

After receiving the call, Yokozawa had left Kirishima behind and promptly returned to the office, where he’d remained with his coworkers until well into the evening checking and rechecking documents, all the while unable to get ahold of the employee in question and winding up having wasted their entire night.

“I’m sorry but just—can you wait on this vacation thing at least until everything settles down here? I can’t just drop everything and run off on a trip right now.”

“Yeah yeah, I know. ...*Dammit*, I can’t believe that asshole—running off and leaving everyone else to clean up his shit...” While he might have understood the situation, it was obvious he couldn’t contain his displeasure. His irritation with Yokozawa seemed to have just been blow-back from this matter in general. “All right; I’m gonna head back to my division and sort things out with my people, so get back to your desk and sit tight—though I’m sorry to say I probably won’t be able to let you off early tonight.” Really, though, the one who needed to be apologized to for her father having to stay late with overtime was Hiyori. “Oh—also, just put together a report on the status of everything for me some time tomorrow. I’m sure there’re a lot of things you’ve got to discuss, so just send me what you’ve got before you leave tonight.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll talk with the editing team and see if we can’t help out somehow, then call you later. Just ring up my extension if you need to ask anything; I’ll make sure I’m available.” The rapid-fire delivery left Yokozawa bewildered. Was he just imagining things, or was this *completely* different from what had just been discussed in the meeting?

“But, earlier you said you wanted...”

“Nah, I was just blowing off steam with your sales people—I mean, my editors have to figure out how to explain this to our authors now, you know? Plus with your boss out of the picture, you people needed a fire under your asses. I’ve noticed some of them spacing out lately, after all. Sorry I took it out on you.”

“Oh...no, that’s...really, it’s fine.” He’d been caught off guard, hardly expecting Kirishima to actually *apologize*, and just as Kirishima had pointed out, he couldn’t deny that the tension between them had eased by several magnitude.

“I just didn’t want them thinking that they could put you up there and things would just magically work out somehow. They’re way too reliant on you, you know.”

“.....!” Yokozawa gaped, finally realizing what exactly had put Kirishima into such a foul mood. He’d obviously adopted the attitude he had with full knowledge of what had been going on around Yokozawa, and while his personal feelings had undoubtedly come into play in his irritation with Yokozawa, he must have been feeling equally frustrated with the fact Yokozawa had been put up there as a punching bag.

“Also—my mother’s taking care of Hiyo tonight, so you don’t have to worry about things at my place.” Kirishima’s parents lived only a stone’s throw away, and it was thanks in large part to their help that he’d been able to raise his daughter while still managing a vibrant career. His mother was a good-humored, bright woman, treating Yokozawa with all the kindness in the world despite his shamelessly making himself at home—and while he’d never met Kirishima’s father, he’d heard that, unlike his son, he was a rather quiet sort.

“All right then; I’m sure I’ll be staying late as well, so I’ll just head straight back to my place when I’m finished. Mind looking after Sorata for me?”

“Sure, I’ll take good care of him. I know you’ve got a lot on your plate—but I’m counting on you.”

“Leave it to me—just who do you think I am?”

“Then I’ll expect great things from you—*Takafumi*.”

“.....!” Yokozawa felt a shudder ripple through him when Kirishima fixed his gaze squarely on Yokozawa as he stood, and the casually delivered use of his first name left him feeling shaken. No matter how he might consider himself well-composed, he could never keep up appearances in front of Kirishima. It was frustrating beyond

expression how he felt like he was some schoolboy with his first crush—but those feelings of unease flickered away only a moment later.

“Geez, this really was the *worst* timing. Suppose it can’t be helped, though—we’ll just have to save *this* for later.”

“—?! Don’t just *grope people’s asses* in passing!” Kirishima’s flirtatious gesture completely ruined the moment, dispelling any warmth that had cropped up in his chest. He slapped Kirishima’s hand away and took a few steps back to ensure the guy couldn’t cop any further feels.

“What’s the big deal? I’m just playing grab-ass with my lover—oh *wait*. You’re married to your work, aren’t you?”

“Enough already!”

At Yokozawa’s raised voice, Kirishima released a loud guffaw. Despite knowing it was never going to happen, he *really* wished the guy would stop toying with him like this. Sometimes it was next to impossible to tell just how much of Kirishima’s words and actions were joking—was he actually that laid back, or only feigning as such? There was no telling.

Regardless, it did nothing to change the fact that Yokozawa hadn’t a clue how best to respond at times like this.

“Ah...” Just as he released a sigh, he recalled suddenly that he’d had something he’d meant to discuss with Kirishima—he’d meant to take care of it the evening before, but with everything going to shit like it had, he’d missed his chance.

He opened his mouth to speak—but just at that moment, the sound of Kirishima’s ringtone echoed through the meeting room, and he quickly snapped his mouth shut again. If it was a call regarding work matters, it wouldn’t do to get in the way. He’d really wanted to get this out of the way before Kirishima returned to the editing floor, but it seemed he’d missed his chance once again.

“Yes, Kirishima speaking. Ah, Kyou-san. What’s the matter? It’s rare for you to call me on my cell phone.” It seemed the person on the other end of the line was Ijuuin Kyou, author of the explosive hit best-selling manga of Marukawa Shoten, *Za Kan*. Kirishima had been his managing editor for a number of years now, and while most authors tended to change up editors with the passage of time, Ijuuin alone was different. Yokozawa didn’t quite understand the particulars, but he knew at least

they'd been paired together since before he'd even joined the company, so it had to be quite a long time.

Ijuuin seemed to have the nasty habit of going completely off the rails whenever a deadline approached, and Kirishima was the only one who could control him at that point. At times hurling furious reproachment, at others, simply humoring him—but always managing to drag a manuscript from him somehow. It wouldn't be overstatement to call him a 'beastmaster' in that sense.

Authors tended to be a rather quirky, individualistic bunch by nature, but rare were the ones who were extraordinarily difficult to work with—with the rather famous literature author Usami Akihiko sitting squarely at the top of the pack. While Yokozawa had never borne witness to his temper firsthand, he'd heard his managing editor's complaints through hearsay plenty of times.

For so much effort to be put into obtaining manuscripts from these people, their works must be extremely fascinating—and hiding this unseemly side from the readers themselves was one of the jobs of the publishing company. Yokozawa himself as well firmly believed that the company should do its level best to keep the dirty parts of the publishing business out of the public eye.

While authors and the works they release were understandably different beasts altogether, if an author were to come off too intense or severe, they ran the risk of their work not being properly received by the readers. And after all, readers had a right to enjoy the work as purely and simply as possible.

"I'm sure I can manage to make some time tomorrow, so I'll head over myself. That ought to be quicker. How's your schedule?"

Yokozawa couldn't make out Ijuuin's voice over the phone, but he could infer his disposition from Kirishima's half of the conversation. As an editor and author who'd worked together for so long, the pair seemed not simply work associates but true *partners*. Maybe that trust that lay between them let them show their weak sides to one another and approach any issue with frank discussion. They'd probably...gotten through a lot together, that way.

He'd often heard of Kirishima's flawless ability in the workplace, but it was only recently that he'd actually started truly paying attention to him when he was 'on'. Given how long they'd known each other, this sort of interaction was to be expected, but when he considered that Ijuuin, in all likelihood, knew a side of Kirishima that he didn't...it left him feeling strangely depressed.

“.....”

It felt odd, like there was something stuck in the back of his throat and if he opened his mouth carelessly, a dejected sigh would come tumbling out. Try as he might to remind himself that it was just Kirishima’s author on the other end of the line, the atmosphere between them which he had no business penetrating left him feeling oddly alienated. He really must be off, today, to be this worked up over a simply work-related phone conversation.

He understood fully well how petty he became in matters of love—that was exactly what made him so irritated with himself.

“...I’m heading out.” The conversation didn’t seem to be about to end any time soon, and without waiting for Kirishima’s response, he quickly took his leave.

“What am I gonna do...”

In the end, he hadn’t gotten to talk things over with Kirishima, and while sure, there was still time before matters became urgent, he couldn’t take things lightly.

After taking his leave of the conference room, Yokozawa found himself loath to immediately return to the sales floor and instead headed for the break room. Despite knowing that everyone was waiting on him back in Sales, he needed to take a short breather. He’d be working all the way up until the last train tonight, after all, so what did it matter if he was another 10 or so minutes late?

Thirsty, he felt around in his pocket for some change and purchased a coffee from the vending machine, deciding to return to the sales floor after he’d finished it. After briefly considering stepping out for a smoke as well, he spotted a familiar face.

“You taking a break, too?”

“Ah, yes.” The tired face that greeted him here was that of the right-hand man to the editor-in-chief of *Emerald*, Hatori Yoshiyuki. Yokozawa was more than used to seeing these people exhausted in the midst of their monthly war zone, but he was sure this wasn’t that time of the month just yet. Had he met with some sort of trouble.

Despite being posted in the editing department, which was never fussy with its dress code, Hatori wore suits to the office—a style of dress that perfectly suited his personality—and while he was nearly as unsociable as Yokozawa himself, he was perfectly mannered with his authors, very often earning him affection and admiration beyond that typically owed him in a working relationship. While such attentions could themselves become another ‘war zone’ of sorts, he seemed to be very shrewd in dealing with his authors and appeared to be handling his job with aplomb.

Even though the editing department worked on a flextime schedule, Hatori always arrived at the same time every day and remained in the office late into the evening—and he flawlessly managed to support his audacious editor-in-chief to boot. That hard-working personality of his suited him well for sales, and Yokozawa had on occasion scouted him for his own division over drinks, but he’d been turned down flat.

“You don’t look so good. What’s up?”

“The anime development for one of the series I’m involved with had all but been decided, but just moments ago it was forced back to the beginning.”

It was rare to see someone like Hatori so dejected. Yokozawa had heard that one of his series was being serialized as an anime—naturally, the sales department had been drafted to start support preparations, and they would soon put in an order for reprints of the series involved.

“Things must’ve been pretty far along if they’d already notified the author; why on earth would they...?”

“It seems the company involved with the development took a pretty hard hit with a previous girls-oriented work they turned into an anime, and because of that, they’re taking a, ‘proceed with caution in matters involving works aimed at a female market’ stance, apparently. So now they want to rethink the plan altogether...”

Yokozawa was familiar with the previous work the partner company had experienced a loss on—of course, given that it wasn’t a Marukawa title, he didn’t quite know all of the details, but apparently on the original mangaka’s internet streaming talk show, their editor had made a guest appearance and had a pledge to make an anime version squeezed out of them. Given that the announcement had been made in such a public venue, there was no choice but to go through with it.

Yokozawa had no clue how much, if any, of the story was real—but since then, that company had banned any unnecessary appearances in the media.

“Yeah—but with that work, it was probably too much of a risk to try and make it into an anime. Famous though the author may have been, the work itself didn’t really have the presence yet to support multimedia, and while it might have been marketable as a live-action story, it really wasn’t suited to being animated, y’know.”

No matter how amazing the finished product was or how high the praise from viewers, if they couldn’t bring in the sales with the package deal, there was no getting back the money invested. In the world of sales, dipping into the red was an automatic failure.

As such, the timing for seeking an anime development for a work was extremely important. One false move, and everything turned pear-shaped.

“They’ve now scrapped plans for a second season, it seems. The investment company won’t front the funds for something that can’t sell.”

“Well, they’ve got to earn back the money they’ve spent so far—they’re probably planning control measures while the wounds are shallow. Seems to me we just got caught in the crossfire of their understandable attempt to stall a second season for the other work.”

“That likely was a large factor, yes.”

“Still, they’ve got to be screwing with us if they’re trying to compare *that* disaster with this work. The themes are completely different, and the only common point they have is the fact that they’re both oriented toward a female market, right? It sucks having them single-handedly decide whether it’ll succeed or not.”

Any work Hatori was involved in was bound to receive rave reviews, after all. Although Yokozawa had voiced his displeasure in a mere fit of irritation, Hatori gaped at him in shock.

“Yokozawa-san, you...read my works?”

“Huh? What the hell’re you saying? Of course I do! I always read anything I’m trying to sell. Admittedly it was a little dull initially, but after I read the second volume, I finally got what the author was going for.”

He didn't have the time to read *everything* Marukawa released, but he made sure to read up on things he himself was going to be involved in selling.

He'd actually never read shoujo manga before entering the workforce—he'd rejected the genre as little more than romantic drivel, but on actually sitting down and flipping through a title, his perception changed drastically. He was reminded of the fact that interesting reads were interesting, regardless of genre.

Of course, he did occasionally come across contents that were embarrassing to read, but that was likely the intention. Among Hatori's managing works in particular, the titles by Emerald cash cow Yoshikawa Chiharu tended to be full of sensitive, emotional material.

Perhaps the delicate balance between serious and gag-filled scenes was what kept readers coming back for more. They weren't left feeling depressed even after reading a relatively serious chapter, and giving it a comedic touch meant you could include light, heart-warming scenes as well.

"Thank you very much."

"And hey—don't beat yourself up just because they don't seem interested. Take it somewhere else; it's a good series, so I'm sure things will work out. Make 'em regret turning us down." He paused. "So...what exactly is it that's got you so worried?"

"It's just...the author was so happy that the anime development had been decided. I was wondering how best to break the news to them—but it's just as you suggested, Yokozawa-san. I'll start looking for somewhere else to bring up the discussion." He seemed to take Yokozawa's advice and started thinking things over—from the looks of things, that weary expression from before seemed to have completely disappeared.

The editor-in-chief of Monthly Emerald, Takano, was famous for his flashy, daring way of working, but the flawless reliability of his second-in-command Hatori was nothing to sneeze at. He was a strategist who was always sure to extensively research anything he was involved in, several steps ahead of the pack in everything he did and never making any moves until everything was in position. Yokozawa had no doubts that the company would soon regret passing over this work of Hatori's.

"By the way—is everything all right?"

"What're you talking about?"

"I simply heard that something's gone horrible wrong." It seemed the disaster in the sales department had made its way through the rumor chain around the office. While it was to be expected—they hadn't made any attempts to stifle gossip, and really, Yokozawa was of the mind that any errors ought to be handled with cooperation from the entire company. However, he hadn't thought news would travel quite *that* fast.

The employee who'd been transferred had dealt primarily with comics marketed to men, and while it was hardly appropriate to use the phrase, "thankfully", it seemed that none of the titles or projects involving Emerald's editing department would be affected by the fallout.

"Things will work out somehow, of course." Covering up for the errors of others was no easy task, to be sure, but this wasn't a situation they couldn't recover from. They had a number of options available, and the very reason Yokozawa had chosen to involve himself was because he had the confidence he could sell more than initially projected. Sure, it would take some time, but everything would work out fine if he just passed on taking a vacation this year.

"Then...are you perhaps worried about something else? You simply don't seem in quite your usual spirits."

"...That perceptiveness of yours really grates sometimes, you know?"

"I do apologize."

Indeed, his sharp-mindedness was troubling at times; he seemed on the surface not to care much for other people's problems, but any time someone's mood turned foul, he was quite skilled with playing mood-maker and turning the atmosphere of a room on its head—a testament to how sensitive he was to the world around him.

Yokozawa had actually been worrying about Hiyori's birthday, which was to take place at the end of this month. Apparently it was tradition for her to invite friends over every year and trade presents together, and while typically she greeted friends with something store-bought like chicken or sandwiches, this year Yokozawa would be flexing his muscles in response to her fervent request: "I really want you to cook for my birthday this year, Oniichan!"

The subject had come up when, rather than fussing over a present on his own, he'd directly asked her what she wanted—and she'd replied thusly. It hardly a tall order, simply cooking a meal for Hiyori, but given that this was a meal for a birthday part,

he had to be sure to please all of her friends as well. What on earth was he going to make?

Perhaps because she'd been raised largely on her grandmother's cooking, Hiyori's tastes ran quite refined, but he hardly expected the other children to be the same. He'd really have to go all out and prepare quite an extravagant feast.

From an outsider's perspective, this likely seemed stupid to get so worked up over, but for Yokozawa, it wouldn't be overstating the matter to suggest that this was one of the more important moments of his entire life. The pressure not to embarrass Hiyori in front of her friends weighed heavily on his shoulders.

He'd initially considered consulting with Kirishima on the matter, but then decided against it. There was little to be gained from asking for help from a guy who couldn't cook anything more complicated than rice porridge, after all. But if he'd hazarded to consult with any of the mothers in the office, rumors would spread around the company before he could blink, without a doubt.

"Well if there's anything we can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask. We're always imposing on you, so it's the least we can do," Hatori offered anxiously, likely having grown worried when Yokozawa had fallen silent in his thoughts.

"Oh—no, really, I'm fine. I'll make sure this matter doesn't affect your people. It's more of a personal matter that's occupying me—" He snapped his lips shut, realizing that he was about to treat Hatori as his own personal Agony Aunt, and distantly recalled something he'd heard a while back. "Hey, you're...pretty handy in the kitchen, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't call myself 'handy', but I can handle myself," he responded to Yokozawa's sudden question, expression curious.

"I'm pretty sure I've heard Takano say you put professional chefs to shame. Did you train somewhere?"

"Hardly; I simply helped out my mother in her work in the kitchen, so it all came to me quite naturally. Then in college, I started living on my own, so it became more of a necessity than a hobby. But why the sudden curiosity?"

"Oh—I just, I cook for myself as well, but my repertoire's pretty limited. I was just wondering what you might recommend..." He could hardly just come out and ask the guy, so he turned the conversation in a general, vague direction—but perhaps

he'd been too pointedly obvious in doing so. Still, it was less suspicious than being overly hesitant and obsequious, he reminded himself, and openly posed his question.

"I tend to browse recipe sites and purchase cookbooks and cooking magazines, myself. I'm quite biased in my tastes, so I try to sample a number of different recipes."

Yokozawa blinked several times in quick succession, surprised at the unexpected response. "Huh, so even *you* have likes and dislikes..."

"Ah, well...yes, though I wouldn't go so far as to say I overtly dislike anything. No more so than most, at least."

Was he just imagining it, or did Hatori look a bit awkward here? Maybe he just didn't want people to know he was a picky eater. Choosing not to pursue the matter any further, Yokozawa offered his gratitude. "Thanks; I'll take your advice under consideration."

"I hope I've been of some help."

Yokozawa hadn't considered consulting a cookbook until Hatori had brought it up—in part because Marukawa Shoten didn't really offer much in the way of books marketed to housewives, but surely he could find some compilation of party recipes at most any bookstore if he just looked. With this problem at least solved, he felt his mood lighten. "All right then—guess I'll get back to work!"

Crushing the now empty cup of coffee he'd been drinking, he tossed it into the garbage and started getting pumped up. First he'd take care of the problem in front of him, and then he'd start planning the party menu. "I'm heading out, then," he offered with a light wave and left the break room behind him.

These past two days, Yokozawa and the other sales reps had been working harder than draft horses. Of course, they were always diligent and serious in their jobs, but this was the first time they'd ever experienced such a bloodthirsty atmosphere.

However, thanks to their hard work, they seemed to have finally spotted the finish line to overcoming the problem staring them in the face, and Yokozawa felt comfortable admitting that they'd made it out of the danger zone. With the word

having finally come down from their superiors, all that was left was to see everything through safely to its end.

Tomorrow he'd be out and about on his feet all day making calls, but with the prospect of finally resolving everything bearing down upon him, he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Granted, the reason they'd been able to resolve the situation had been due in no small part to the cooperation of a great many people, and he'd have to pay them back with his hard work in the future.

While there were still a few small, irritating matters that required his attention, he'd likely be able to take care of everything provided he attended to them as they came, and although there was still some underlying resentment to the lovely parting gift the employee had left them all, he was mostly just glad that the guy had left the sales department for good. If his work ethic had continued unnoticed, things could have been a hell of a lot worse.

More to the point, everyone coming together as they had to solve this problem had greatly improved the camaraderie among the group, he felt. They all had their individual talents, to be sure, but Yokozawa was glad to have experienced for himself how working together like this just improved the group's overall potential even further.

Still, he hoped to never soon repeat something like this. On the heels of this issue, a new rule was being instated requiring all members of the department to be sure to report the status of the projects in which they were involved. It had become achingly apparent that attempting to take on too much by oneself resulted in serious errors, and none had voiced any opposition to the new measure.

"We're currently holding a sales campaign on our newest product! Please try out this free sample!"

Shoved along with the crowd as he exited the station, a young woman pressed something into Yokozawa's hand.

"What's the point of giving *me* something like this...?" It seemed to be some sort of deodorant towelette for mopping away sweat, but the pink packaging and "peach mint scent" made it clear that this product was marketed toward women. Deciding he'd have to just foist it on Hiyori later, he slipped the sample into his pocket and weaved his way through the crowd toward his destination.

With the sun setting, it was thankfully a bit cooler now, but the breeze snaking around his body was still faintly warm. He sighed to himself, lamenting that the sweltering nights would surely be cooler if they could get a shower or two to come along.

He trod along a path he knew all too well, headed for *Books Marimo*—but not for work, today, instead hoping to find a cookbook that might help him plan the menu for Hiyori's birthday party.

Figuring the store would have a wide range of books to choose from, he hadn't given his trip much forethought, but it probably hadn't been the best idea to visit a store packed to the gills with people who were bound to recognize him. How on earth was he supposed to explain himself if someone spotted him scouring the cooking section?

While he was considering that maybe it would be best to just give up and try for another shop, though, he arrived at the stop before he realized it. "...Maybe I'm over thinking things..."

Just because there were a lot of people he knew working there, it didn't mean they were bound to notice him. Plus, at so large a bookstore as *Books Marimo*, there were probably more employees who *wouldn't* recognize him. Convincing himself thusly, he girded his loins to enter the shop—when his phone began buzzing in his pocket with a call from Kirishima. He'd mentioned earlier that he'd be out of the office on a meeting and had left some time that morning.

"Yes, this is Yokozawa."

"It's me. Can you talk right now?"

"Yeah, it's fine. What's wrong?" Kirishima tended to opt for a direct phone call rather than a simple text when he wanted a favor. Stepping off to the side so as not to get in the way of other customers entering and leaving the shop, Yokozawa turned his attention to their conversation.

"Seems like work's gonna take a little long this evening, so I don't think I'll make it home in time for dinner. Sorry about it—but would you mind going ahead and eating with Hiyo?"

"Weren't you supposed to go straight home after you finished up your business with an author? Did something happen?" If Yokozawa recalled correctly, Kirishima was

supposed to be meeting with Ijuuin today. Maybe things hadn't gone the way he'd suspected they would with the author.

"Oh—no, it's nothing like that really. Just—I had some other work to take care of after it that's taking longer than I expected. I'll be sure to bring Hiyo a treat home with me, so apologize to her for me?"

"All right—then, give me a call when you get to the station. I'll have dinner waiting for you then."

"Sorry for the trouble—I'll see you later." Seemingly relieved at Yokozawa's reply, a flustered Kirishima quickly cut the call short. In the *Japun* offices, there were always plans floating around for anime or drama adaptations of series. When one rose up the ladder to the position of editor in chief, one's work became less about managing authors and running around picking up manuscripts and more about sitting in on meetings and discussions, work as the representative for the editing department only increasing.

Yet Kirishima managed to complete all of his own work as well as guiding his subordinates, all the while never neglecting his role as a father. When did the guy manage to find the time to take a breather?

Firing off an e-mail to Hiyori to let her know when he'd be home, Yokozawa stepped into the bookstore, nearly boarding the down escalator out of habit. "Oops—my apologies," he muttered as he hastily turned around and weaved his way through the people waiting behind him. Tamping down his embarrassment, he glanced over to review the map hanging on the wall. Taking the escalator up the second floor, where the cookbooks were organized, he headed for the shelves he was concerned with.

"So, guess this is it..." As expected, *Books Marimo* offered quite the impressive lineup of products, with more books than he could possibly count lined up on the shelves. From specialty texts aimed at professionals to introductory texts full of pictures aimed at beginners, it was impossible to determine where to even *start*. Yokozawa took one long sweep of the shelves, scanning for anything that popped out, before his gaze drew to a stop on a magazine aimed at housewives. It seemed to be the previous month's issue—and boasted a collection of recipes for children's parties on the cover.

Taking the magazine in hand, he flipped through to scan the contents, relieved to find that the recipes included within didn't seem all that complicated. Given the

range of dishes and the visual impact, he decided to buy the magazine, and considered that it might be best to practice a few of the dishes at his own place, out of sight of Hiyori, to avoid the possibility of screwing up on her big day.

Returning to the first floor, he scouted out a register on the far end not manned by anyone he knew and finished up his business. But just as he was about to make his way home, relieved that he'd managed to find what he needed without issue, he caught a voice calling out to him.

"Huh? Yokozawa-san?"

"O—oh, hey...Yukina." Perhaps because he'd had his guard down, his tone came out rather suspicious-sounding, but Yokozawa's strange demeanor didn't seem to ping the radar of the *Books Marimo* part-timer in the least, and Yukina Kou greeted him without a care in the world.

"You should have mentioned something if you were here!"

"I just came for some personal business as a customer today, that's all. I didn't want to disturb anyone." It was nothing more than a flimsy excuse—but he could hardly say he'd explicitly avoided the comics floor so that he wouldn't be caught by anyone he knew.

Despite being a full-time art university student, Yukina was in charge of the shoujo manga book racks here, making excellent use of his almost maniacal knowledge of the genre. There were none in the sales department who didn't know Yukina, as he was quite famous among the sales reps for inducing huge leaps in sales of any titles that he pushed to customers. Plus—he was the only one who could dream up such passion-filled promotional displays. While none intended to interfere with whatever his plans might be, many a sales rep fervently hoped he'd find formal employment with *Marimo Books* in the future.

"You done with work for the day?"

"I am; I had the morning shift, today. If you're headed out now, would you mind if we walked to the station together, Yokozawa-san?"

"You sure you wouldn't rather head out with one of those girls ogling you over there?" The guy had looks that made him seem as if he'd jumped out of the pages of a shoujo manga himself, garnering quite a following of ardent fans. It was

commonplace to find gaggles of high-school students hanging around in front of the shop, and he wound up with a mountain of chocolates every Valentine's Day.

"Well, I'm not on duty now—so it wouldn't do to give them any false hopes," he responded with a gentle smile. He seemed to not only be well-equipped on the outside but in personality as well, amicable with coworkers and obedient with his superiors. While he might be aware of how popular he was, he obviously hadn't let it go to his head. His parents must have raised him well.

Yokozawa couldn't remotely imagine what kind of person might find themselves hitched to a guy like this. "Well then...shall we head out?"

Eager to avoid the high-school girls following them, they rushed to cross the street before the light changed, somehow managing to slip into the crowd and heading back up the path that Yokozawa had just traveled.

"Still, it's quite warm today! I was inside the shop all day for work, but I'm sure you sales reps must have it rough!"

"I suppose. I'll admit that it's tough making rounds in this weather, though; the difference in temperatures inside and outside really take their toll on you. But—truthfully, a desk job never suited me."

It was tough regulating one's body temperature forever darting in and out of the baking heat outside and the air-conditioning inside. While few businesses set their thermostats to freezing these days, with the advent of energy conservation measures in recent years, it still put stress on his body's core temperature.

"Ah, you have a point. The really cool trains feel like heaven when you first board, but if you spend too long riding them, your sweat starts to chill and it's a whole new problem. Still, once you get off, it's like diving into hell again."

"It never used to bother me, though; guess that's age for ya."

"That's age for ya'—what're you talking about? Wait—just how old are you again, Yokozawa-san?"

"Twenty-eight."

“EH?” Yukina’s expression froze as if he’d just seen a ghost, and Yokozawa’s brows drew together in a frown—it wasn’t as if he didn’t understand the reaction, but really, there was no need to act so surprised.

“...What’s with that face?”

“Ah—no it’s just, well you remember that editor you introduced to me a while back? I was just shocked you were actually younger than him...”

“Ugh—why the hell did you have to go and compare me with *him*?” Yokozawa was well aware of the fact that he looked old for his age, but he never wanted to be compared with the biggest babyface in the company. It wasn’t going too far to state that how on earth that guy managed to stay looking so young and vivacious was one of the seven mysteries of Marukawa Shoten.

Perhaps thinking that he’d offended Yokozawa, Yukina frantically rushed to change the topic. “O—oh right! The publishing companies have summer break periods also, don’t they? I suppose around Obon or something?”

“Nah—we don’t have set vacation periods. Everyone has to apply in advance to take time off when they want.”

“Wow...that’s actually nice! If you aim for a period apart from most companies, you can plan a trip for a time when it won’t be as crowded!”

“Our department head’s off on a trip overseas for just that reason. Oh—wait, no...I think he’s due back today, actually.”

“That must be nice, taking a trip overseas!”

While it certainly was nice being able to take a vacation during periods other than peak season, it made it difficult to actually *find* the time to do so. That drawback was the whole reason he hadn’t really gotten to take a proper vacation last year, and when he’d confessed to Kirishima that this year was looking to be the same, the guy had thrown a fit.

“Well, if you can find the time, at least.”

“Can’t you take off whenever you like?”

“Sure, but...it’s not so easy when you consider your workload.” He trailed off as they entered the station proper, and the cool air flowing from a nearby department store played across his skin, mixing with the warm breeze around him.

Any time he thought about taking a vacation, his thoughts always tended to drift to the work that would be waiting for him when he came back. He fervently wished he were more adept at turning his work mode ‘on’ and ‘off’, but it was no small matter.

“You’re very hard-working, Yokozawa-san. You should stop worrying about work and just relax, at least when you’re on vacation!”

“Well, if you have any tips on how to do so—I’m all ears.”

“Haha, you have a point.” They started down the stairs, when Yukina made a sound of surprised confusion. “Hey—Isn’t that...Kirishima-san over there?”



Huh?” Turning his gaze in the direction Yukina was gesturing, he caught Kirishima’s figure, sure enough. He was standing in front of a department store guide map with a woman—a beautiful one with long hair bound up and wearing a pants suit. He couldn’t see Kirishima’s expression from this angle, but the woman had a warm, friendly smile turned his way. They traded a few words as they wandered into the underground market area of the station.

“You didn’t want to call out to him?” Yukina curiously questioned Yokozawa, who’d frozen in place, unable to react.

“Well—we shouldn’t bother him during work.”

“That was work? That woman looked quite happy speaking with him; I just assumed she was his girlfriend.”

“Huh? Why would you think that?” he bristled unthinkingly, voice edged with irritation. Yukina likely had meant nothing by the comment, and it was natural for Yukina—who knew nothing of his and Kirishima’s relationship—to assume that the pair were dating.

Despite understanding this, though, he couldn’t keep his heart calm. Yukina, to his credit, seemed oblivious to Yokozawa’s roiling emotions, and continued to himself, “I’ve only really met Kirishima-san formally that one time at the autograph event, but he seems so cool... Man, I hope I can be like him when I grow up.”

“.....” Kirishima had said he was doing work, and Yokozawa didn’t doubt that was the truth. He wasn’t *doubting* the guy—the reason he was feeling so out of sorts...was simply because he was jealous. It was exactly as Yukina had said: they made an attractive pair.

Yokozawa often found himself wary of the gazes of those around them, but he highly doubted that anyone would look at the two of them walking together and suspect that they were lovers. And yet despite being so sure that no one would ever suspect the two of them to be dating...here he was getting jealous of some girl for just *looking* like Kirishima’s girlfriend.

“...Yokozawa-san?”

“Sorry—think I got a little woozy from the heat.”

“Are you all right? You might have heatstroke!”

He felt bad for making Yukina worry, but he could hardly confess he'd just made something up on the spot now. "Yeah... I think I'm gonna grab something to drink first before heading home."

"Would you like me to get something for you?"

Yokozawa nipped the matter in the bud before Yukina could offer to stay with him until he felt better. "I'll be fine: it's no big deal. I'll just get something from a vending machine on the train platform. Your train's that way, right? I'm taking the subway."

Despite still wearing a worried expression, Yukina obediently took out his train pass case and headed for the ticket gates. "Well then—be sure to rest up today! Take care!"

"Thanks; you take care going home as well."

"Right! If you'll excuse me now."

With the effort of keeping up appearances with his hastily made-up excuse, Yokozawa's throat had actually become *really* parched, and after passing through his own set of ticket gates, he passed up the line waiting to board the train and instead headed for the vending machines.

Passing his IC card over the sensor, he pressed the button for a bottle of mineral water, and with a *clunk*, the bottle came clattering down. Reaching down to take the bottle in hand, he gulped down the cool water.

While the chill worked to cool his flushed body by several measures, though, it couldn't sooth the unease that had settled over his chest.

"Ugh..." For some time now, Yokozawa's mind had been full of nothing but what he'd seen back at the station.

It was beyond narrow-minded to jump to conclusions like this just because Kirishima was walking around with some woman, Yokozawa's conscience was quick to remind him, but he just couldn't shake that sense of unease.

The fact that the treat Kirishima had brought home for Hiyori was an assortment of gelatin desserts from the very station department store Yokozawa had spotted him at only strengthened the flights of fancy in his mind. He'd probably bought it when

Yokozawa and Yukina had seen him, and Yokozawa desperately wished there were some way to wash from his mind the image of the pair merrily shopping together.

So overcome was he with these feelings of irritation and frustration, he stepped out onto the veranda to smoke a cigarette at Kirishima's apartment for the very first time. Naturally, he'd at least made sure that Hiyori was already asleep, but he'd have to put off his goal of quitting smoking for a while yet at this rate.

"God, I'm pathetic..."

Part of the reason he was having such difficulty settling his feelings on the matter had been due to the fact that Kirishima had been so vague in speaking about his work today. He'd been upfront about the fact that things had gone well with Ijuuin but had returned nothing but ambiguous responses when pressed about the second work matter.

Yokozawa had known right away he was being lied to; after all, if it had been something Kirishima actually wasn't at liberty to discuss, he was always quick to say so. Poker face though he may have had, Kirishima wasn't actually very adept at hiding things. He had no problem offering faint praise with a smile on his lips, but when he was hiding something, he became absurdly suspicious in his mannerisms.

Yokozawa stuffed the cigarette butt, now short and hardly smoked at all, into his pocket ashtray and headed back into the room, breath drawing short as he wandered into the cool, air-conditioned living room. Perhaps part of the reason he hadn't been able to organize his thoughts had been the sweltering night air draping itself around him.

Kirishima was sitting on the couch watching the business news while paging through what looked to be a literature piece. He flipped through the pages swiftly, reading at a rather quick pace.

"What are you reading?"

"Usami Akihiko's latest piece. They got the samples in today, so I borrowed one."

"Oh, *that*..." There had been talk around the office about the flighty author's editor finally managing to catch him and holing him up in the hotel he'd cloistered himself in until he finished the manuscript. Given the way the literature sales reps' eyes had seemed to be almost brimming with tears as they expressed their relief that the book had been finished on time, there was likely a grain of truth to the rumor.

“He really is something... It’s only the prologue, but it just pulls you right in. Just goes to show you his skill as an author to be able to suck a reader in right from the start.”

“Well I haven’t gotten to read it yet, so don’t spoil anything.”

“Yeah yeah, I know.”

Yokozawa headed for the fridge, intent on quenching his parched throat. As he filled a glass with some barley tea he’d made earlier, he caught the sound of a cellphone ringing—and it wasn’t his. But while Kirishima had to have realized that it was his own, he made no move to answer it, a fact which drew Yokozawa’s curiosity.

“Hey—your phone’s ringing. You’ve been getting a lot of calls tonight, huh...” Indeed, it had been ringing on and off for a while now, and for some reason Kirishima never made motions to check who was calling.

“It’s just a text; I’ll glance over it later.”

“If it’s just a text, then why not check it now? What if it’s one of your subordinates needing help with something urgent?”

“I make it a point not to do work at home. Plus—even if it *were* urgent, I couldn’t do anything about it until tomorrow.”

“I...suppose not, but...” he started—but then his own phone started to ring. “...I just got a text from Katou—asking if I know where you are. What the hell—why is he asking *me*?!”

Kirishima let out a laugh at Yokozawa’s irritation here. “Maybe because he’s convinced you know me better than anyone else?”

“I don’t...really know all that much...” Indeed, while he might know things like his favorite foods or birthdate, he knew far less than he didn’t—but he immediately regretted the petty tone he’d taken. He really was behaving childishly tonight—and it was all out of an immature, selfish desire to monopolize.

“Really? I think it’s more than enough knowing each other’s *body temperature*.”

“Wh—you, cut the dirty talk! And just respond to Katou already!” He reached out for the cell phone when Kirishima continued to refuse to answer it, and the moment his fingers brushed the screen, a familiar image popped into view.

There on the screen was a picture of Kirishima and Hiyori in high spirits along with three of a theme park’s mascots and a very sullen-looking Yokozawa. It was a

picture they'd taken together on a recent outing. "...How many times do I have to tell you—stop setting pictures like this as your wallpaper!"

"C'mon, don't act so pissy—it's just a family portrait."

"I sure as hell am gonna get 'pissy' over that!" He could hardly remain calm given that there was no telling when someone might catch sight of it.

"Don't you think being upfront like this is better than sneaking around and making others curious?"

"People are *already* plenty curious! And by the way—you *did* delete those pictures from before, right?"

Kirishima had a nasty habit of flashing private shots of Yokozawa around for all and sundry to gawk at. When Hiyori had begged Yokozawa to buy her a ring at the theme park, Yokozawa had done so—going so far as to buy Kirishima his own as well, knowing the guy would just sulk over it later if he didn't. After he'd somehow found himself bullied into lining up for a picture of himself and Kirishima wearing their matching rings together, the next thing he knew, the picture had made its way around the company.

"And what does 'from before' mean? The time when Sorata was sitting on your chest and you were grumbling in your sleep? Or the one with the matching rings?"

"The matching rings of c...wait. Wait a minute—what was that first thing?" This was the first time he'd heard about this Sorata matter, and despite knowing that it was in bad taste to fiddle with someone else's cellphone, he quickly navigated to the data folder. Opening the folder dated around the time Hiyori had gone off on her trip, he found an image of Sorata sprawled on top of Yokozawa, who slept with a deep frown on his face.

At a loss for words, he stood trembling in place—when Kirishima snatched the cellphone back from him. "What was it—right before Hiyo came back, I suppose? I woke up around dawn to use the bathroom—and when I peeked into your room, I found Sorata sleeping on top of your stomach. It was such a great image, I couldn't help myself."

Yokozawa felt a wave of light dizziness wash over him, and he massaged his forehead. "...You know, you 'can't help yourself' a hell of a lot." The guy's thoughtless actions invited suspicion, and Yokozawa shuddered with fear over potential worst-case scenarios. Kirishima liked to call Yokozawa a worry-wart, but he simply

maintained they needed to be as careful as possible to ensure that the worst never happened.

“C’mon, don’t worry so much—if anyone seriously had any suspicions, those chicks certainly wouldn’t be all giddy with joy.”

“They’re another matter altogether...” Given that Marukawa Shoten had an entire BL division, there were no few employees working at the company whose preferences ran in that direction. Many a new hire had labored under the misconception that the reason so many of the women had turned their attention in their direction was because they were just that popular.

“It’s a perfectly good front—plus, it could work to our favor around the office, so all we’ve gotta do is give them a little fan service now and then.”

At length, Yokozawa gave up his argument. “Fine—but it’s *your* ass if things get out of hand.” There was no use arguing with someone as eloquent as Kirishima.

“I’ll be glad to spend the rest of my life taking responsibility then.”

“.....” Offhand though the comment may have seemed, it was still far outside of the realm of expected responses, and as Yokozawa stood there struggling with his reaction, Kirishima turned his attention instead to his scheduler, perusing he calendar.

“Enough about that, though—we really need to decide when we’re gonna take this trip. We’re probably gonna be pretty limited in the hotels still available to us, but I’m sure things’ll work out somehow.”

“Don’t just change the subject like that! And I still haven’t decided whether or not I’m going to go!”

“Which means you’ll decide soon enough, though, right?”

“Stop drawing your own convenient conclusions. Besides—don’t you think it’s the least bit strange for *me* to go with you two?” He’d had similar misgivings at the theme park before, but two men and a young girl running around together definitely stood out, and not in a terribly good way. Plus—it was even further outside of ‘normal’ for the third wheel to not even be a relative.

Waitstaff at cafes and the like often asked if they were siblings, and while he had made do with idle, vague responses thus far, there was no doubt in his mind that they were suspicious of his relationship with the Kirishimas.

It wasn't like he was doing anything *wrong*, so he reminded himself there was no sense in paying more attention to the gazes of those around him than necessary, but still—any time he considered what might happen if he were to cause any gossip-fueled rumors to start up about Hiyori, he couldn't help upping his vigilance.

"You're over thinking things; Hiyo's been saying she *wants* you to come with us, so what's it hurt? You're liable to make things more suspicious by worrying so much over it. Be as brazen as you want here."

"....."

"Besides, you'll break Hiyo's heart if you don't come. If anyone asks, just say you're a subordinate forced to come along to be his superior's bellboy. Now c'mon—gimme your schedule." Without waiting for permission, Kirishima reached over to rifle through Yokozawa's bag, pulling out his scheduler.

"Don't just touch shit without asking!"

"Yeah yeah~ I'm sorry."

Given how easily he was able to snatch the scheduler back, it seemed Kirishima hadn't been seriously intent on inspecting the contents—he probably was just enjoying getting a rise out of Yokozawa. Any time Yokozawa overreacted to his teasing, it only served to amuse the guy. It was best not to rise to the challenge in the first place.

Perhaps surmising that Yokozawa was reminding himself of this fact, Kirishima leered and suggestively added, "What, don't tell me you've got some little sticker marking the last day you fucked or something?"

"Who the *hell* would do...!" He immediately regretted raising his voice at Kirishima's idle banter, chiding himself for so easily letting Kirishima manipulate him in the palm of his hand.

Most everything written in his planner had to do with work, so it was hardly a problem if Kirishima saw it, but he absolutely didn't want Kirishima to realize he'd made sure to mark his birthday so that he wouldn't forget it next year.

"C'mon, I'm just *kidding*. It's probably nothing but work stuff, right? Just open it up to August—chop-chop!"

"...Fine." If it was just August, then there shouldn't be any issue, and with relief on the inside, he reluctantly opened his planner to the appropriate page. Every month

of his schedule had his plans clearly noted, and this month as well he had something to do almost every single day. Kirishima's planner was in much the same state.

After placing the planners side by side and comparing the dates, Kirishima pointed to a period around the middle of the month. "You could probably take some time off around here, can't you?"

"What—*next week*? Like hell I'll be able to get everything in order by then!"

"It's not impossible, though, if you just ask for help from those around you. You're already doing more work than most of the others in your division, so you deserve to hit them up for a few days' vacation."

"....."

"If it still looks difficult, then do you think you could at least take off the Friday and Monday around that weekend? We could probably manage something then." With this proffered compromise, it would be beyond childish to continue putting up a fight. It wouldn't hurt to at least *see* if he could work something out, so long as he went in without getting his hopes up. That way Kirishima would have no choice but to give up if it still looked impossible.

"...Fine, I'll ask my boss tomorrow."

"Want me to put in a good word for ya?"

"Thanks but no thanks." While it would probably come out eventually, he hoped to keep the fact that they were taking the same days off as secret for as long as possible from the rest of the company.

"Hiyo and I'll take care of figuring out where we're gonna go." It was more trouble than it was worth to get on to the guy for treating this trip like it was a given they were all going to go, so Yokozawa settled for simply sighing to himself.

Maybe he was getting too worked up over every little thing. It was the same with the woman from before—if he was going to be this concerned about it, he may as well just go ahead and *ask*. Sure, the chances were high that Kirishima would laugh in his face, but that was pretty much an everyday occurrence by now.

"Hey—" But just as he'd worked up the nerve, hoping to casually bring up the incident, Kirishima's cellphone once again interrupted them.

"....." When he glanced at the screen, Kirishima's face seemed to wrinkle into a sharp scowl for a moment.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just...”

Yokozawa had considered briefly that it was simply Kirishima losing his temper at Katou once again trying to contact him, but Kirishima would never make that kind of face with a subordinate. Thinking he might ask who it was after Kirishima had finished his conversation, the ringing ceased before Kirishima could even answer it.

“...Why didn’t you answer?”

“The number was blocked, so I wasn’t sure if I should. But seeing as they hung up right away, I guess it was a misdial? But enough about that—what were you about to ask me?”

“Huh? Oh—nothing. It wasn’t a big deal. I’m...gonna go take a shower.” He wavered when Kirishima turned the conversation back on Yokozawa—this was hardly a topic he could just pick up and try to broach again just like that. In the end, having lost the proper timing, he headed off to the bathroom like he was turning tail and running.

“...*Dammit*,” he hissed, cursing himself and his lack of self-respect. Sure, it was best to just stop worrying and move on from this whole thing, but the longer he let these doubts fester, the bigger they grew. He’d hoped to be able to get his thoughts together once he found himself alone, but his worries only grew more and more pronounced. Why couldn’t he get better at dealing with this kind of thing? He knew perfectly well what route to follow in his head, but his emotions and actions just wouldn’t submit to his will.

With a soft sigh, he began to strip—when a sense of unease settled over him. “Oh—crap, I forgot.” He only now remembered the sample packet he’d received at the station, still stuffed in his pocket. He’d meant to give it to Hiyori but completely forgotten. Just as he was considering passing it off to her the next day, though, a knock came on the door to the changing room.

“Mind if I ask you something before you get in the shower?”

“What *now*?” Perhaps because he was making such an effort at sounding cool and unruffled, his voice came out sounding particularly irritated, and while he was mostly glad it hadn’t broken at least, he probably sounded far colder than he really felt.

Kirishima stepped into the changing area and locked the door behind himself, staring long and hard at Yokozawa's face.

"Fine, wh—what do you want, then?"

Kirishima crossed his arms and spoke. "There's...something you want to ask me, isn't there?" It was less a question and more of a realization.

"Not particularly. What the hell would give you that idea—"

"Man's intuition."

"The hell, *intuition*..." It was as if he was speaking with all the confidence in the world and not a single shred of evidence—and at Yokozawa's exasperated expression, Kirishima came back at him with an air of discontent.

"You're making fun of my intuition, aren't you? I'll have you know that it's rarely led me astray."

"Well unfortunately, this is one of those times—sorry, but I'd really like to take a shower now, so would you mind? Or if you're going to take one first, then I'll leave." Relieved he seemed to have thrown Kirishima off the scent for now, he attempted to change the subject—but Kirishima wasn't about to give up so easily, it seemed.

"Does it have anything to do with what you've got there in your hand?"

"Huh? Ah—oh, it's just some sample I got shoved on me by the station. I thought I'd give it to Hiyori, but I forgot about it, that's all." Maybe the guy had the idea that someone had given it to Yokozawa out of affection? Kirishima did on occasion engage in these little bouts of jealousy, after all—but Yokozawa was quite certain he was much more the jealous type than Kirishima. While he went to great effort not to show it in his expression, he hated the fact that he even found himself paying more attention than was necessary to the way Kirishima interacted with other members of the *Japun* editing team.

"...You really don't have anything you want to say to me, Yokozawa?"

"....."

The more Kirishima pressed him on this matter, the more difficult it became to give voice to his feelings, and much as he might have wanted to exclaim *Just whose fault*

do you think it is that I'm worrying about shit like this in the first place, his pride stilled his hand.

His chest throbbed with shame when he immediately adopted a stance to shove him away as Kirishima stepped closer—it physically *hurt* to realize that it was reactions like this, *this* kind of attitude that worried Kirishima.

What the hell did he have to do to make it so he could properly express himself? What use was pride at times like this?

As he stood there silently, lips tightly pursed, Kirishima let out a long sigh. “...You can be so damn stubborn sometimes, you know? But what can I say—I kinda like that about you. If you ever feel up to talking about it, you know where to find me. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“.....!” Yokozawa’s hand unconsciously snapped out to Kirishima as he turned his back to leave, but before he could grab him by the shoulder, he froze in place, hand instead gripping into a tight fist.

What was he intending to say just now if he stopped him? But just as he’d dropped his gaze, chiding himself for acting so impulsively, Kirishima whirled on him with, “And there’s the chink in the armor!”

So sudden was the turn that Yokozawa couldn’t react, and he reflexively glanced up—only to find his lips captured by Kirishima’s.

“—!”

In contrast to Yokozawa’s wide-eyed expression, Kirishima’s own gaze was simply cool and cocky. Yokozawa felt blood rush to his head at the sensation of his lips being devoured, and the moment their tongues brushed, a throbbing chill rocketed up his spine.

While far from *used* to these types of interaction, he’d at least finally stopped rejecting any throwing up resistance simply from a spinal reflex. Just as the strength was about to leave his legs entirely, he found himself supported at the hip as Kirishima brought their bodies snugly together, and his heart skipped a beat at the body heat passing through their thin summer clothes.

“Ngh...!” His tongue, held fast, felt disturbingly as if it were about to melt away—he knew it was *there*, but every time their tongues touched, the points of contact melded together and it felt like everything was falling apart.

The core of his mind was melting, leaving him feeling as if he were drowning in some thick, drunken sensation, but he retained the sense of self to reach up with both hands and bury his fingers in Kirishima’s hair and tear himself away bodily.



"I said—*enough!*"

"I was just getting started..." Struck by the glare that Kirishima turned on him, Yokozawa faltered for only a moment—and seizing the opportunity, Kirishima moved to capture his lips once more.

"You just—*never learn!*" At this rate, he was bound to lose all sense of self and propriety, but Kirishima continued to press in, heedless to Yokozawa's dismay.

"C'mon... Just a little more..."

He braced his hands against Kirishima's forehead and chin and glared from close quarters. "*No*. Hiyo's here."

Kirishima, however, was not about to be cowed by this expression and instead sniped, "She's asleep; what's it matter?"

"A whole hell of a lot—so *no*." On this, he was firm. It wasn't a matter of simply making sure they weren't found out—if he gave himself an inch, he feared he'd take a mile.

Perhaps Yokozawa's conviction in this respect reached Kirishima, for he at last relented with, "...Geez, you're such a wet blanket. How much longer's it gonna take before you'll actually put *your* arms around *me* of your own accord...?"

"You just never think things through!"

If Hiyori ever found out about the two of them, he'd never be able to just saunter into this apartment again. Their situation was abnormal enough as it was; he didn't want to increase the awkwardness any further.

"Fine... I suppose I'll be patient; until the evening of our trip, at least. But in return—"
"He whipped a finger out and thrust it into Yokozawa's face just beyond his nose, "
"—you'd better be prepared."

Shaken, Yokozawa returned in a broken voice, "Pr—prepared...for what?"

"For something you can't even *imagine*. Though feel free to attempt to do so to your heart's content until then."

“Wha...?!” And with a knowing smile and outrageous parting words, Kirishima immediately exited the changing area.

Yokozawa was *certain* there'd been nothing wrong with how he reacted, but...he couldn't shake an ominous feeling. What the hell did the guy mean with *something you can't even imagine*?

They neither one of them had any particular *fetishes*, he was quite sure—while he had a modicum of knowledge that came with being an adult, he'd never experienced any particular desire to do anything out of the ordinary.

But...maybe Kirishima was different. If he'd been holding back some ludicrous, unimaginable sexual request...

“...the hell's the point in me wracking my brain with this kind of shit?” The only reason he'd phrased his ultimatum had been because he *wanted* Yokozawa to go out of his mind with imagining the worst-case scenario. The more he worried, the more he'd just be playing into Kirishima's hand, and intent on being his plaything no further, Yokozawa forcibly cut off the train of thought.

“Damn it's hot...” Yokozawa muttered absently to himself as he stalked up a hill with absolutely no shade. He couldn't even muster up the energy to sigh in the face of the baking sunlight streaming down upon him, and he could feel the heat seeping up from the asphalt through his leather shoes.

He belatedly realized that it hadn't rained *once* since August had started—and while by now he'd almost gotten *used* to the heat, wandering around outside constantly exposed to the sun was slowly but steadily sapping his energy.

He really needed to strengthen his stamina, but more worrisome than the fatigue was the dip in his appetite.

“Wonder what I should eat today...”

Dabbing at his forehead with the handkerchief Hiyori had presented him with following her recent trip, he continued up the hill toward the office. The handkerchief had his initials shoddily embroidered into the fabric—naturally, Hiyori's own handiwork.

It seemed she'd had her maternal grandmother teach her a bit of handicrafts when she'd recently gone to stay with her grandparents by herself and had apparently stitched the handkerchief—along with a matching, differently-colored one for Kirishima—and a collar for Sorata then.

Touched by the thought, he'd initially intended to keep it safely tucked away, but given what a waste it was not to use it, he'd now taken to carrying it around with him.

As he stepped over the threshold into the office building proper, a wave of cool air washed over him from inside, and he inhaled sharply at the sensation of his sweat drawing away. He grasped his shirt collar and began flapping the material over his skin as he headed for the elevators—when he noticed that there were an unusually large number of people milling about the first-floor lounge area.

"What's going on?"

He couldn't tell what the fuss was about, but it was clear something had them in high spirits, leaving them looking like a group of wayward middle-school students skipping lessons.

"What the hell are you lot doing? What about work?"

"Ah, Yokozawa-san! Check this out!" It was Katou from *Japun's* editing department who excitedly turned to address him—and he seemed to be the source of the fuss.

"Check out *what*?" He cast a furtive glance at the table the group were all gathered around, noticing several photographs spread out over the surface. He couldn't tell the subject matter from this angle, but they seemed to be artistic shots, the type used in gravure magazines.

"*This!*"

One of the photographs was shoved into his face like a seal case from some period drama, and the close distance made it impossible to focus, leaving him unable to tell for a moment just *what* the picture was of.

Furrowing his brow, he took the photograph by the edges and pulled it away from his face to a suitable distance. "What...the hell is this?"

The words fell from his lips in a shocked whisper—because it was a photograph of Kirishima.

He was stretched out seated on an expensive-looking couch, legs crossed over each other, like a model—and it wasn't just the one photograph; there were several different ones on the table, each depicting Kirishima in some similar pose. He seemed to be seated in a hotel lobby.

"The pictures from Kirishima-san's interview the other day finally arrived via e-mail. Supposedly we're supposed to scan the data for dud shots, but they all look amazing, huh! It's almost a *waste* they're only going to use two of these for the article..."

Yokozawa had been shocked at how much the pictures looked straight out of a gravure shoot—only to be proven exactly right, and while Katou was busy touting Kirishima's accomplishments as if they were his own, Yokozawa was still hung up on the word 'interview'.

"Interview? When did he give one of those? I haven't heard a word about it."

"Maybe he forgot to mention it? Or it was too embarrassing to tell you about?"

"If he were embarrassed about it, he sure as hell wouldn't be flashing these pictures around."

"Hmm...but—they were supposed to have the interview here in the company lounge, but they changed to a hotel because he was worried about having people gawking at him. Maybe he just didn't want us giving him a hard time about it!"

There may very well have been absolutely no deeper meaning to the fact that Kirishima had kept this from him—but it wasn't exactly the best feeling in the world to have *someone else* tell him something about Kirishima he hadn't known before.

It was ridiculous, being jealous of the guy's own subordinates—but these reactions weren't something he had any control over. He was doing his level best keeping his feelings from showing clearly on his face at this point.

"So then—why're *you* flashing them for all and sundry to see?"

"Well just *look* at them! He looks so good, we couldn't just keep them to ourselves! He's so cool-looking here, that editor-in-chief of ours!"

The members of *Japun*'s editing division practically worshiped Kirishima, and while they did occasionally complain about him, that was in itself a form of boasting about their oh-so-capable superior. It was a clear demonstration of the healthy relationship Kirishima shared with his subordinates.

The Kirishima staring back from the photographs before Yokozawa could've easily gone toe-to-toe with any actor or model out there in sex appeal, and given that the work had been done by a professional photographer, they really were amazing shots.

It was impossible to tell if he'd been purposefully posed that way, but with the way his long legs were crossed and gaze cast off to the side in a weary, listless manner, no one could tell he was a mere amateur.

"I'll admit...he *is* a good-looking guy." While he'd never said as such before the guy himself, he'd always strongly felt that way, finding it impossible to avoid getting unconsciously lost in staring at him.

"Right?? If we had a fashion magazine here, they'd definitely do well to hire him on as a model, huh! Ah—then, why don't we just settle for blowing one of these up into a poster??"

"Ooh, and include it as a freebie with the next issue of *Japun*?"

"Hey—you *do* remember you run a *shounen manga* magazine, right?"

"How about making a grab for female readers with this? We'll *slay* them with Kirishima-san's pheromones!"

"*Slay* them..." Yokozawa was about at his wits' end with fielding this commentary—and, oblivious to Yokozawa's fatigue, the women around him began to chatter more excitedly at the prospect.

"Oh man, I would *totally* buy that! But actually—I seriously want copies of some of these photos..."

"Me too!"

"Ooh, then me three!" At this, hands from almost the entire group shot into the air.

"What the hell are you intending to do with these pictures, then?"

“Feast our eyes upon them, I’m sure! Ooh, but it would’ve been even better if Ijuuin-sensei had been there with him...”

“*Excuse me?*” But he quickly snapped his mouth shut, convinced that it was best not to ask too many questions even if the suggestion had piqued his curiosity.

“Or ooh—they should just put out a photobook for Marukawa Shoten itself! Between the likes of Kirishima-san and the Emerald guys, it’s a total waste not to make use of how hot they all are!”

“I totally agree! I’ll put forth the proposal at the next meeting!” The conversation had taken a strange turn now. If he got himself dragged into going along with this outlandish idea, he’d be in trouble—and before any such thing could happen, he tried to find the proper timing to quickly take his leave, but froze stiff at a casual question raised by one of the women.

“That reminds me—I heard somewhere that Kirishima-san was taking part in a marriage interview...anyone know if there’s any truth to it?”

The group erupted into excited chatter. “Wait—*what?*! I haven’t heard anything about that!”

“Me neither! Yokozawa-san, have you heard anything?”

At Katou’s question, he shook his head. “N—no, nothing...” If he *had* known anything, he certainly wouldn’t have had the time to be dawdling around here with all of these rubbernecks.

“I’ve also heard something along those lines! Supposedly one of the higher-ups among his clients took a shine to him or something.”

“But—doesn’t Kirishima-san have a daughter?”

“Well maybe that’s precisely why he’s doing it? With a marriage interview, he can be sure that the other person is already well aware of his situation, and I’m sure it must be rough for a man to raise his daughter all by himself, don’t you think?”

“.....”

The women’s all-too-valid points cut Yokozawa to the quick. He’d once had a similar (but not very well-thought-through) conversation with Kirishima before which had

only served to piss the guy off. While he'd already admitted that the entire conversation had been ill-considered, hearing this now, he was realizing all over again how thoughtless his words had been at the time.

Kirishima certainly had the help and support of his parents, but he was a fine parent all on his own as well. Hiyori looked up to him, and no matter where you dragged her, she had been raised with impeccable manners.

She seemed to have been overly considerate of her hard-working father, not often seeking attention or asking to be spoiled, but of late she'd finally started allowing herself to be a bit adorably needy now and then.

It was hardly strange for a superior to bring up the notion of marriage interviews with as capable a subordinate as Kirishima—particularly of late, with news getting around the company that he'd removed his wedding ring. Likely a large number of people had seen it as a good sign of their potential.

And that was when the image of what had happened a few days prior drifted back across his mind's eye: maybe that woman...had been the other party in the marriage interview?

"...No way in hell," he quickly denied himself, shutting down that train of thought. It was *beyond* jumping to conclusions to assume that any woman who *happened* to be with Kirishima was potential marriage material.

"Did you say something just now?" Katou pressed, turning his mutterings back on himself, but Yokozawa responded without answering the question.

"I'm heading back. You lot better not dawdle here too long and get back to work." And with that, he exited the lounge area, worried that spending too long listening to the women gossiping would leave him with nothing but uncomfortable mental images.

He violently slammed the elevator button and headed up to the Sales department.

Fine—supposing the marriage interview thing *were* true, it didn't mean Kirishima was cheating on him. He could hardly be expected to shirk his superior's whims, as an employee, so it wouldn't be beyond expectation that he might meet with the girl just *once*. And this was Kirishima, after all: he likely saw it not as hiding the fact that he'd been offered a marriage interview so much as having no need to go out of his way and *announce* it. It was ruder of *Yokozawa* to jump at shadows like this.

But the reason that his heart continued to waver in worry despite understanding all of this...was because of his own self-doubt. From a general perspective, it was hardly appropriate for the partner of a single father to be a *younger man*.

Two consenting adult men were more than welcome to do whatever they wanted, taking responsibility for the own actions and decisions, and if they faced any backlash from the public, then that was their own problem.

But he and Kirishima had *Hiyori* to worry about; they'd done a good enough job so far in explaining to Hiyori's school and her friends' parents and guardians why Yokozawa spent so much time at Kirishima's place, but there was no telling when some gossipy busy-body would raise a fuss.

Naturally, Yokozawa was doing his level best to avoid causing Hiyori any amount of shame or embarrassment, taking every precaution to avoid anyone finding out about their relationship—but they'd probably never be able to be *perfectly* safe. There was no changing the fact that he was a *man*.

"Ah—welcome back, Yokozawa-san!" He was pulled back to the present from being deep in thought when someone called out to him—without realizing it, he'd made his way back to the Sales floor.

"What're you eating there, Henmi?" The guy was sucking on a small plastic spoon at his desk, and when he glanced around the room, the other department members also seemed to be eating something.

"It's really hot, so the department head treated us all to ice cream! He said it was his way of apologizing for not being around when we were in a jam. Oh—by the way, I was the one who went out and bought it all!"

"Well good for you." It had hardly been an issue that could be solved with a simply ice cream treat, but this was obviously more of a matter of repairing feelings than actual damage done. Simply having a superior thank you for your hard work had a way of inspiring work ethic. Having such value placed on their work would in turn spur them on in the future.

Ever since Kirishima had lectured him on the difference in effect inspired by expressing thanks or not, Yokozawa had become more conscientious in openly thanking others for their work—and perhaps it was because of that that his work seemed to have become that much less of a hassle to get through.

He'd initially been almost ashamed to do so, with everyone he encountered staring at him as if he'd grown a second head, but now it was almost expected.

"Your portion's in the refrigerator, Yokozawa-san. Someone else is liable to snatch it up if you don't eat it soon, so I'll go and fetch it for you now!"

"Oh—no, it's all right, I'm—" *Fine*, he'd been about to say, but Henmi had already left for the break room where the refrigerator stood, quickly returning at a jog with the bag of ice cream in one hand.

"That was close! This is the last one!" He'd brought back a ramune-flavored ice cream bar. Realizing it would be futile to protest that he didn't need it now, he decided to just go ahead and accept it. It would be perfect for quenching his throat parched from making his rounds outside. "This takes me back... I used to eat these all the time as a kid."

These things must be a timeless product—the packaging looked as if it had been updated, but it still had the same two-bar shape as it had in the past.

"Indeed. That was why I couldn't help snapping them up!"

"You probably just picked treats *you* wanted to eat." Indeed, he was *sure* the one he'd just seen Henmi eating had been one of the more expensive items, and having this pointed out so bluntly, Henmi struggled for an excuse through mumbled speech, expression abashed.

"W—well, I just figured...it'd be better to have a lot of choices, see..."

"And thought you'd eat the leftovers that no one else wanted?"

"That's not it at all! Well, I mean—okay, *sure*, I was *kind of* hoping..."

Yokozawa snorted dryly at Henmi's stupidly honest confession. As completely frank and straightforward as this guy was, Yokozawa sometimes found himself truly worrying if he was cut out for sales or not—but his openness and amicable nature earned him high regard and trust from the sellers, leaving someone like Yokozawa—who only *intimidated* when he kept his mouth shut—genuinely envious of his friendly nature.

“Here, you can have half—you wanted to eat it, didn’t you?” He split the sea-blue bar into two and held out one half to Henmi, who responded happily like a puppy wagging its tail.

“Are you sure?? Awesome! Thanks so much!”

The reaction was incredibly endearing, and Yokozawa leveraged a condition: “But in return, you’d better get that proposal to me by *six* today.”

“Eh?! Wait—then, you can have this back!” Henmi tried desperately to return the half-eaten bar at this, choking in shock.

“You’ve already bitten into it! No returns accepted!” With that, he nibbled off a bite of his own, and the crisp, refreshing flavor of ramune spread over his tongue.

How many years had it been since he’d had ice cream? The familiar flavor took him back to his childhood—single days had seemed inexplicably long back then. Why did time seem to fly so much faster when you became an adult?

“That’s not fair, though! It’s totally cheating to tack something on after-the-fact like that!”

Yokozawa responded solemnly to the miffed Henmi, “You never know what sorts of traps await you out there in the wide world—you should never take something that sounds too good to be true at face value.”

“Please stop lecturing me like that!”

Henmi turned a reproachful gaze Yokozawa’s way, obviously taking him completely seriously, and finding his sullen expression so amusing, Yokozawa relented with a soft, “...I’m only kidding.”

“...Huh?” He glanced up at Yokozawa, still nibbling at his ice cream, with confusion evident in his features.

“I said I was *kidding*. I’m not going to change your deadline just because of some ice cream.”

“Y—you nearly gave me a heart attack!” Relief and anger vied for expression in his face, and he puffed out his cheeks.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist. I was only teasing you. If you don’t hurry up and eat that, it’s gonna melt all over you.”

“Uwah—ack!” Flustered, he lapped at the ice cream that had started to drip onto his hands, and Yokozawa proceeded to finish off his own ice cream as he took in the sight.

“...You know, your personality’s really changed lately, Yokozawa-san.”

Yokozawa gave a jolt at the unexpectedly sharp point, but he managed to keep anything from showing in his features. “Has it?”

Henmi just pressed even more aggressively. “You always used to just roll your eyes at my jokes before!”

“That’s because your stupid puns were so incredibly dull.”

“That’s not true at all! I’m always going all out with my numbers!”

“Maybe that’s why they always fell flat.”

“Huh? You mean my jokes never went over well?!” Henmi dropped deep into thought with the shock of Yokozawa’s revelation, and Yokozawa continued on to his own desk, turning over in his mind what Henmi had commented on. He’d been relieved that Henmi hadn’t seemed to have noticed how truly shaken he’d been by the words, tossing the remnants of his ice cream into the garbage pail by his desk.

He wasn’t sure if his personality had really changed or not, but he *had* grown more prone to cracking jokes lately—likely due to having become freer in expressing his feelings.

He didn’t exactly want to admit it...but it was probably due in large part to spending so much time around Kirishima. Being tripped up from time to time as he had been, it seemed some of the guy’s personality had rubbed off on him.

“Yokozawa-san—which jokes of mine have been the worst so far?”

“Forget about it and just get to work.” This was neither the time nor the place to be letting one’s mind drift to unimportant matters—and repeating the advice to himself, he lifted the lid on his laptop, resetting himself to work-mode and switching his focus to his computer as it started up.

“Here are your drinks, sirs.”

“Thanks.” They both took in hand the glasses that had just been set before them, clinking the rims together softly with mutterings of *good work today*.

As much as it may have made him seem like an old geezer, for Yokozawa, summer *always* called for a beer at the end of the day—and a cold mug after work was absolutely delicious.

Before he even reached over to taste their appetizer, he’d emptied the glass in a single gulp, and as he returned the mug to the table—nothing but foam remaining now—Kirishima warned, “Hey, watch your pace now. Go overboard like before and I’m leaving your ass here this time.”

“I’d never let myself go *that* far again.”

The bar he and Kirishima had come to this evening for the first time in a while was the very same one Yokozawa had drowned his sorrows in some time back. He’d been so utterly ashamed of the state he’d allowed himself to slip into that he’d avoided the place for a while, but missing the atmosphere, he’d decided to drop in once more—of course with a proper apology to the owner, who’d assured Yokozawa he wasn’t offended in the least when he’d dropped into a deep bow. Indeed, he seemed actually *amused* at having gotten to see Yokozawa in such a rare state, and it felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders, relieving him.

Given that they’d arrived here together to start with, they opted for a table over seats at the counter, believing this would afford them an easier chance at conversation. Yokozawa ordered another beer, while Kirishima ordered a *shochuu* on the rocks for his second drink, and from there they began to pick away with their chopsticks at the food carted out to them. Yokozawa was particularly fond of this bar’s tofu dishes, with a menu laid out and formatted according to the seasons.

The bar had a domestic flavor in its dishes and functioned as a cafeteria restaurant during the day, and it seemed that the reason they’d never really met before that evening despite coming to the same shop often had been because Kirishima largely frequented this place during the day.

“Drinking in an actual restaurant for the first time in a while sure feels great,” Kirishima commented, tilting his glass toward him, and Yokozawa finally addressed something he’d always wondered about.

“Why do you only ever drink beer at home?”

“Beer’s really bitter; I figure there’s no way Hiyo would ever want to try drinking it. And while I doubt she knows how *sake* or *shochuu* taste, she might mistake those for water or juice and drink them without realizing.”

Ah, so he’d been doing it out of consideration for Hiyori, it seemed. There was always the chance that she might mistake a can of *Chuu-hi* for juice or something, after all.

“That reminds me—the first time I ever tried beer, I thought it was really bitter and couldn’t understand why people thought it was tasty. Though now I find it hard to believe I ever felt that way.”

“Guess you’ve got a point when you put it like that...”

“How’d you get so knowledgeable about booze?”

“My boss when I first joined the company thought it was hilarious how he could pump me full of alcohol and I wouldn’t get drunk, so he dragged me to bars all over town. I went to so many wine tastings, I just picked it up along the way.”

“Must’ve been nice, though—learning something new like that. Granted, having a less-discriminating palate’s probably cheaper in the long run.”

Yokozawa loved hearing about what Kirishima was like before they met—it allowed him to catch a glimpse of the roots that led Kirishima to become the man he was now. They’d even taken, of late, to discussing their lives during their days of compulsory education.

“By the way—you should know that Katou was waving around some gravure shots of you at the office earlier this afternoon. Why didn’t you tell me about the interview?”

Yokozawa deliberately worded his question casually so as not to disrupt the flow of conversation—but while he’d thought he’d managed to express himself remarkably well this time, Kirishima fell silent for a moment.

“...It’s not like it was something I had to go out of my way to tell you about, was it?”

“That’s rich, given that you usually can’t *wait* to tell me shit I’ve got no business hearing,” he spit out in response at the uncharacteristically blunt reply from Kirishima, and his ire only rose as he was reminded of the fact that he obviously didn’t mind his own subordinates waving around those sorts of pictures however they pleased.

But the moment he opened his mouth to give the guy a piece of his mind, Kirishima sullenly muttered, “...It’s because I was *embarrassed*, idiot.”

“...*What?* What the hell is that? I don’t get it—if you didn’t want to do the shoot, you shouldn’t have agreed to the interview in the first place.”

In Yokozawa’s opinion, the crappy pick-up lines the guy liked to spit out left and right were a *hell* of a lot more embarrassing—there was definitely something wrong with Kirishima’s way of thinking in this respect.

“I sure as hell didn’t agree to it because I *wanted* to do it, you know.”

“Then you should’ve just turned it down.”

“It was a request from a superior; I *couldn’t* turn it down. You seriously think I *wanted* to sit through a shoot like that?”

“You sure seemed to be enjoying yourself in it.” Indeed, he hadn’t felt an ounce of hesitation or shame in Kirishima’s expression in any of the pictures.

“I could hardly sit there frowning in the pictures, now could I?”

“Yet you still flashed them around for you subordinates to see?” His tone took on an unintentional pout.

“That was just because Katou happened to find them. I couldn’t just tell him *no* when he turned those puppy eyes on me asking if he could show them to others.”

“...Always gotta show off, don’t you?”

“Well, I *am* an adult.”

One thing he’d learned since they’d started dating was that Kirishima was *immeasurably* vain in some respects, almost never whining or complaining. The fact

that he allowed Yokozawa to see all of these sides to him underscored the deep trust that ran between them—but Yokozawa couldn't say he cared at all for the way the guy put on airs all the time around his subordinates.

He hated this childish habit he had of harboring such discontent within himself, but he tamped down these feelings and instead continued his line of casual questioning.

"So? What kind of magazine was it?"

"Run-of-the-mill information rag marketed toward women. Apparently there are some proposal pages where, every month, they do a piece on working men in their 30s. I flipped through some back issues they provided as examples and saw pieces on a financial analyst, a pilot, all kinds of careers."

In all likelihood, the magazine cared less about the range of jobs presented and more about introducing readers to 'great men' in different fields.

"So how the hell did they manage to track down *you* then?"

"The daughter of a friend of my boss's is working as an editor there apparently, and it seems she requested an introduction. It was tough to turn the offer down, too, seeing as I'd met the guy before when I got dragged out on a golf outing once."

"Huh..." Yokozawa's mind caught on the words *friend of my boss's*—if he recalled correctly, the girls from earlier had mentioned that Kirishima's marriage interview had come about because a 'higher-up' had taken a shine to him.

But Kirishima had said he'd been *dragged out* to play golf, so surely it had been a business meeting of sorts. Plus—anyone who was present at that sort of event had to be someone of some status. Now Yokozawa couldn't help thinking that the aim of the meeting had been less to score an interview and more to meet privately with Kirishima himself.

Reminding himself not to jump to conclusions, Yokozawa continued the conversation casually. "Katou said he wanted to include one of the pictures as a freebie poster. Where'd you do the shoot?"

"There's no way we could stick those in with a *manga* magazine. They had the photoshoot at a cafe—and the interview was supposed to follow, but the shoot ran long and they didn't have time to continue there, so we had to change locations."

“Ah, so *that’s* why you were late coming home.”

“There weren’t any open shops around, either, so in the end we wound up having to go into a hotel cafe on the other side of the station. Though despite all the trouble we went through, we didn’t really talk about much in the end.”

“What’d you talk about?”

“Just the usual—how’d you get the job you’re in now, what aspect of your job leaves you feeling fulfilled, that kind of thing. And then things like my hobbies, schooling, my ‘type’, what kinds of things I look for in a marriage partner.”

“What the hell? That’s kind of rude to ask, isn’t it?”

Kirishima laughed dryly at Yokozawa’s unabashed display of displeasure. “I stopped responding toward the end. I figured what’s the point in responding to picky little questions like that if it won’t fit on the page. It was for the good of the magazine, I thought.”

“And...you were fine with that?” Sure, maybe that had been his reasoning as a fellow editor—but as a person, had Kirishima actually felt it had been the right decision?

Kirishima fell silent for a moment at Yokozawa’s question, then spoke again, his response mingled with a sigh. “...And this is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you about it. It’s pathetic—having these snooty pictures sitting next to a superficial interview.”

“I never said—” But then he realized that Kirishima’s hiding the interview from him had simply been another aspect of his vanity, and finally understanding how Kirishima felt about this entire affair, he fell silent.

“And well—while not exactly a *quid pro quo* arrangement, they’re going to be running a special on *Za Kan* next month. It sounds like they wanted to pull Kyou-san into the mix as well, but I turned them down.”

Not only Kirishima but Ijuuin as well had been blessed with handsome features that seemed wasted on a mangaka. With the two of them together, there was no helping how they stood out. Compiling an article on the veteran mangaka Ijuuin and an editor famous in his field would undoubtedly draw attention.

The girls at the office who'd used Kirishima's pictures as gossip fodder had also mentioned that it would've been even better if Ijuuin had been in the shoot with him. They were likely in high demand.

"I mean, it's not like I don't understand where they were coming from—but I had them settle for just me this time at least. Not that I expect there to be a *next time*." Yokozawa didn't miss the note of annoyance in the laughingly delivered line; it seems Kirishima's patience had been truly tested. "Still—I've gotta say this is rare. You taking an interest in my work. You hardly ever touch on anything that doesn't directly involve you."

"It—was just casual curiosity, that's all. With Katou flashing those kinds of pictures around, I couldn't help wondering..."

"What, you wanted some copies for yourself?"

"You—don't be stupid! Who the hell would want..." Though well, if he were to be *completely* truthful...he didn't *entirely* not want any—but he was hardly capable of frankly confessing as such to the guy himself.

"C'mon, don't be shy~ Which ones did you want?"

"I *told* you, I don't need any of—"

"Kirishima-san...?" A voice called out to them from an unexpected direction, and Yokozawa cut himself off, turning in the direction the voice came from. There, he found a slender young woman standing near them.

Directing her gaze toward Kirishima, she let out a soft cheer. "Ooh, I knew it! It looked like you from behind, so I took a chance! I can't believe I ran into you in this kind of place!"

"Ah, nice to see you, Kayama-san. It was a pleasure meeting you the other day." Yokozawa could swear that just before Kirishima returned his laughing greeting to the woman, his expression darkened for only a moment.

"The same goes for me—with my apologies for being so out of sorts that day. I'm sure I inconvenienced you..."

"Hardly; anyone's work can be fraught with troubles, after all."

“Oh, I’m so relieved to hear that! It was such an honor being able to work with you. I really enjoyed getting to discuss manga with you! I’d love to have a conversation again sometime.”

“Nooo no no, no more interviews for me, thanks. I’m more of a behind-the-scenes kind of guy, really.”

Then—we’ll have to chat privately! I must confess, I have personal interest in these topics as well.”

Yokozawa jolted at the woman’s phrasing, but Kirishima didn’t bat an eye, instead switching topics.

“So—what brings you to this shop tonight, Kayama-san? Are you alone?”



"I came after a friend recommended this place to me as really delicious. I was supposed to meet her here, but she's running late and told me to go ahead and find a seat inside. Still—I never expected to run into you, Kirishima-san! I'm thrilled! Do you come here often?"

"Ah, kind of."

On most any other occasion, Kirishima would usually attempt to steer the conversation himself, but for some reason, his responses tonight were falling somewhat flat. Reasoning with himself that perhaps he just wasn't very good at interacting with this type of person, Yokozawa casually glanced over at the woman—and gave a start.

It was the same woman who'd been with Kirishima the other day. She'd changed out the pantsuit from before for a rather flashy outfit tonight: a blouse with a large, open collar and a shortish flared skirt.

Yokozawa's face twisted into a grimace at the sweet scent that wafted his way every time she pressed a strand of hair behind her ears. It wasn't a foul odor or anything—but it was hardly appropriate for an eatery. It would be one thing if she'd just happened upon this place by chance, but seeing as she'd said she'd come here for the explicit purpose of eating, she seemed lacking in forethought.

"Umm, if you don't mind...would it be all right if I joined you? It's a bit lonely sitting here by myself waiting for my friend to arrive."

"Oh—my apologies, but I've got company here myself, so..."

"Eh? Oh! Oh, of course! I'm sorry for suggesting something so rude!" It seemed she hadn't even so much as *noticed* Yokozawa. Perhaps she hadn't actually expected Kirishima to turn her down, for her expression paled in shock for a moment. However, she quickly pasted on an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry for making such a strange request. My friends tell me I do that kind of thing all the time! Going on about how I'm *such* an airhead!"

"Not at all; think nothing of it."

"I hope we can spend some time together in the future if we get the chance."

"Of course; should occasion allow," Kirishima returned with a cautious smile. Offering Yokozawa a nod as well, Kayama took her leave.

After ensuring that Kayama was now out of earshot, Yokozawa whispered softly, "You don't think you were a little sharp with her just now?" Sure, she didn't seem the type to easily take a hint, but it probably would've been fair to go a bit easier on her than he had. She had been quite the looker, after all, and probably didn't have much experience being so stiffly rejected after making her intentions as clear as she had—but she'd clearly been a bit put off by Kirishima's blunt way of speaking just now.

Kirishima had always been one to conduct himself with the utmost tact around women, leaving them with the impression he was something of a flirt, so she probably had been more than a bit taken aback by his response.

"I just thought I should probably put my foot down with her. Would've been more trouble than it was worth to give in and let her sit with us."

"Well, sure, but...wasn't she someone you do business with?" Here he was worrying over Kirishima's curt attitude, and the guy himself seemed to almost be holding back laughter. "...What the hell's so funny?"

"Nothing; just amused how sometimes strange things happen. This has to be the first time *you've* ever told *me* to take a hint, hasn't it?"

"...That phrasing makes it sound like I'm never considerate of those around me." But on second thought, Kirishima had a point—Yokozawa was the one who, by and large, had to be told to consider other people's feelings. And it was for that very reason that he'd been shocked by Kirishima's reaction just now.

It wouldn't be overstating the matter to say it was the first time he'd ever seen the guy treat a woman with that attitude. After all, around the office, he was so courteous and polite one might say he was being overly familiar with them.

"Taking a hint and being considerate are two different things. It's not that you *can't* take a hint; you just generally choose *not* to. Though I guess our company's stuffed to the gills with guys just like you in that respect."

Hoping to avoid being made the butt of any further jokes, Yokozawa brought the topic back around. "Whatever—are you sure it was all right for you to take that tone? Wasn't she the editor for that magazine?"

“Nah, she’s just a freelancer. She’s the one who interviewed me.”

“Oh—are they not the same?” Yokozawa had been *certain* she had been the potential marriage partner. He’d assumed that the way she seemed rather informal and close with him had been because of her father’s connections with Kirishima, but now that he knew that wasn’t the case, he was starting to get a bad feeling about this whole affair.

In fact, she came off as *overly* familiar in hindsight now; the nerve she had, asking so tactlessly to share his table, which would’ve been rude even if they’d met before on a number of occasions.

“Either way, I’m sure I’ll never have to meet her in person again. All of the confirmation for the article can be handled through e-mail, after all. Barring chance encounters like just now, she’s pretty far out of my field.”

“‘Out of your field’?”

“Well—she writes for a *women’s* magazine. Seems like she specializes in articles on cosmetics and fashion; she’d never read any manga aside from the really famous ones that get turned into TV dramas.”

“...Would someone who never reads any manga know anything about appropriate questions to ask a manga editor?” For interviews like this, didn’t they typically use a writer somewhat versed in the field their subject was involved in?

“Supposedly they wanted an article written from the same viewpoint as their readers. The pictures are usually more important than the writing on the page, after all, and if the interview was too stilted, no one would read the article anyways.”

“I guess not...” But then, if they only needed some superficial language to toss onto the page, what reason was there to keep the guy around for so long? It was more than a little discomfoting realizing that Kirishima had pretty much been *used*.

“Hey, c’mon—don’t look like that. You know how things go sometimes.”

“Yeah yeah, I know,” he snapped, and after a moment’s silence, Kirishima responded with a leering smile.

"Are you...by any chance *jealous*? You idiot—you know there's no way I'd ever have eyes for anyone but you." Kirishima reached a hand out and ruffled his hair, suddenly in much higher spirits.

"Uwah—*hey!* What the hell are you—*idiot*, cut it out!" He slapped Kirishima's hand away and began to pat his rumpled hair back down into place.

"Geez, this side of you is so fucking adorable, you know."

"...You *really* need to get your ass to an optometrist."

"What for? There's nothing wrong with my eyes. I'll have you know I'm a long ways off from having my sight affected by age."

"Then maybe it's your *head* that needs checking."

"You know, I *have* been thinking my attention span's been getting kind of short lately—but well, there's no man alive who wouldn't be in high spirits in the presence of his *darling* lover."

"...You're so full of shit." He'd considered jumping on what amounted to Kirishima talking in his sleep, but quickly gave up.; it was precisely because he always rose to these challenges that Kirishima got carried away.

"Oh right—so, I'll give you copies of whichever of those pictures you like. That way you can slip 'em into your planner or hang them up in your place, do whatever you want with them."

"I'm not putting them in my planner and I'm *sure* as hell not hanging them in my apartment."

"But you do still want them, yeah?"

Yokozawa's words caught in his throat for a moment as he remembered wanting them just a *teeny tiny* bit—a mistake."...Who the hell would need any of those pictures?!"

There was no way Kirishima was going to let that moment of hesitation slide, though, and he poked Yokozawa squarely in the center of his forehead. "So, you *do* want them! I keep telling you, feel free!"

"I don't *need* to feel free, thank you very much." But Kirishima didn't seem to hear any of his grumblings, simply leering merrily. There was no stopping him once he got like this—the only option left was to simply field his continuous teasing and wait until he tired of being in 'bully mode'.

"Maybe I'll print out some of those pictures from before and decorate my desk with them..."

"You sure as hell better *not*! You'll start up more weird rumors that way!"

"What's wrong with printing up pictures of Hiyori? Oh my—did you assume they were pictures of *you*?"

"....." Realizing he was being toyed with yet again, Yokozawa's face erupted in flames, leaving him unable to respond when he recognized that he would only be digging his grave even deeper.

"You know, your face is kinda red."

"It's just the booze!" And while he knew fully well that there was no way his face would change color just from a mug or two of beer, he couldn't just keep his mouth shut this time.

Yokozawa tossed his bag beside the bed, heading straight for the window which led onto the veranda and throwing it open to allow a strong breeze to spill into the room.

"Man, how many years has it been since I came to the beach?"

From the veranda he stood on atop this seaside resort hotel, he could glimpse the far horizon, and the sun shone down brilliantly from the utterly cloudless sky. Lowering his gaze, he caught the coastline in his field of vision, dotted with what looked to be hundreds of beachgoers.

Who'd have thought that he'd be able to enjoy such a picturesque summer vacation as this at the age of 28? Since joining the workforce, all of his 'summer vacations' had amounted to little more than the hour-or-so train ride each way between his apartment and his parents' place.

But the entire reason he was where he was right now...was because he'd come along with Kirishima and Hiyori on their family vacation.

While this 'summer vacation' had been causing him so much angst of late, he'd eventually been able to rather easily secure three straight days off. Just as Kirishima had assured him, after consulting with his boss and coworkers, the others' cooperation had allowed him to easily take time off.

They'd been extremely lucky to find two rooms in as nice a hotel as this during such a busy season—all thanks to managing to snap up spaces that had been canceled at the last minute. They'd reserved two rooms with twin beds—try as Kirishima might to persuade him that Hiyori wouldn't mind at all, Yokozawa couldn't bring himself to room with a prepubescent girl.

Sorata was staying with Takano, his former owner. Given what had happened between the two of them, the atmosphere between Yokozawa and Takano had been rather stilted and awkward for a period, but with time, feelings had gradually settled down. At this rate, things were bound to eventually go back to the friendship they'd shared when they'd first met.

And Yokozawa was convinced that the reason he was able to see things in such a positive light now...was all thanks to Kirishima. He'd initially felt nothing but irritation when Kirishima had forcibly dragged him out of his dreary days spent wallowing in self-pity, but now he was well and truly *grateful*.

Granted, it wasn't like there were *no* painful feelings left within himself, and the wounds would likely never fully heal. But—that was all in the past as far as Yokozawa was concerned now.

Had he been an uninvolved third party, Yokozawa might have been shocked to learn how his feelings had changed in not even six short months—and truthfully, he was more than a little surprised himself. He couldn't count the number of times he'd thought, "No way...", but this did nothing to change the fact that his feelings for Kirishima were growing day by day.

"...And I *still* haven't gotten to ask him yet..."

While he ought to have had a good dozen chances to address it, he'd yet to bring up the issue of Kirishima's 'marriage interview'.

"So have you seriously been approached about a marriage interview?"

All he had to do was say something like that, casually and simply, but every time he tried to, his voice caught in his throat. He didn't have much confidence that he'd be able to keep a straight face if Kirishima admitted that it was true—nor could he imagine how he would react should Kirishima attempt to give another vague response.

If someone had come to him with a problem like this, Yokozawa would've undoubtedly advised them to, "Man up and face them properly," but he remained unable to broach the subject, frustration with his hesitation growing. That contradiction gave birth to stress, which in turn dragged him into a loop of ever deepening despair.

However, Kirishima's attitude these days also played a large role in Yokozawa's inability to broach the subject. Lately he'd worn a strange, conflicted expression whenever he checked numbers for incoming calls to his cell phone, and Yokozawa had noticed the guy even purposefully hiding his mail.

Kirishima maintained that nothing was wrong, but if that were truly the case, he wouldn't be behaving like this. He *had* to have something he didn't want Yokozawa to see.

He'd tried checking with Hiyori and even casually consulting Katou, but it seemed that Yokozawa was the only one who had noticed anything strange with Kirishima's behavior of late. And while he didn't trust himself, he didn't suspect the guy was cheating on him. Kirishima wasn't so low as that, and if he'd truly found someone else he had feelings for...Yokozawa was certain he would *tell* him, upfront.

But he wanted to *be* there for him, somehow, if the guy was in trouble—but the fact that Kirishima was acting as if absolutely nothing was wrong...meant he'd judged Yokozawa unreliable in this instance.

The more thought he put into the matter, the more depressed he became, and in contrast to the vast blue sky spreading out before him, Yokozawa's heart grew steadily darker.

"...Guess I should get changed."

He shook off the dark turn his thoughts were taking and forced himself to shift his attention elsewhere. He didn't have time to just space out like this—they were supposed to head straight down to the beach now.

He unzipped his suitcase and pulled out a towel and swim trunks. It'd been too much trouble to worry about digging around in his old closet back at his parents' place, so he'd gone out and bought a new pair of trunks and beach sandals. Try as he might to play it cool, he'd been a bit embarrassed by how much he seemed to be looking forward to it, but it mattered little so long as Kirishima didn't find out.

Just as he was loading everything he needed into a plastic bag, the chime to his room sounded. "You ready yet, Oniichan??"

"I'll be right there—wait just a second," he responded with a bitter smile at Hiyori, who sounded like she couldn't *wait* to get out. He slipped on a beach coat and grabbed the bag which held his lounge seat, exiting the room—where he found Hiyori wearing the adorable bathing suit she'd had her grandmother buy her before summer break and holding a beach ball.

"Sorry for the wait. Have you made sure you haven't forgotten anything?"

"Yup, everything's ready! Father helped me check!"

"And what's that father of yours up to now?"

"He said he'd be right behind me, but..." Just as they turned their gazes to the room next to his, the door opened, and Kirishima stepped out clad in swim trunks, a Hawaiian shirt, and a pair of sunglasses—an outfit that wasn't normal by *any* stretch of the imagination. Granted, the inner tube hanging off his shoulder lent him some air of domesticity, but it couldn't dispel the overall sense of unease that hung about him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Took a little time to blow up the swim ring."

"Sure you aren't forgetting anything, Father? I'm gonna run on ahead and push the button for the elevator!"

"Be careful not to trip!" Yokozawa called out worriedly as Hiyori dashed off for the elevator, obviously eager to get into the water. It was easy to catch one's sandal and trip on the rug carpeting the hallway.

As he watched her retreat with worry in his voice, Kirishima raked him up and down with a rude glance, disapproval thick in his voice. "You sure you look *lame* enough, there?"

"You sure you look *gaudy* enough, there?"

"Huh? You think? This is the outfit people usually wear at resorts, isn't it? What—you want me to lend you some of my clothes? I've got another Hawaiian shirt in a different color."

"I'm afraid I'll have to *graciously* decline. Why the hell would I want to wear *your* clothes...?" Yokozawa seldom gave two shits about what other people thought of his clothes, but a chill rippled through him at the mere *thought* of what they'd look like wearing matching outfits. More so, if he showed up wearing a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses to the beach...he was sure to be thought a mobster.

"You don't think we should make it clear we're a lovey-dovey couple head over heels for each other? We're heading out to the beach in the middle of summer, you know. You might just find yourself getting *hit on*."

"Yeah *right*. And just who are you saying we should make that clear *to*?" He knew quite well that getting riled up would only serve to amuse Kirishima even further, so the trick was to come off as dispassionate as possible in any response he gave.

"Why, everyone on earth, of course." He shot a cold glare at the ostensibly serious Kirishima and started forward. "What, you don't believe me? You should know fully well I'm dead serious here."

"Yes yes, of course. I get it." He let Kirishima's teasing wash over him as he casually sauntered forward, catching Hiyori calling them from up ahead.

"Father, Oniichan! The elevator's here now!"

"All right, all right! We're coming, hold your horses!" At her urging, they picked up the pace. Perhaps more than being excited to go to the beach, she was simply thrilled they'd all managed to make it here together as a trio. The whole ride there, she'd gone on and on about how, "It would've been even *more* fun if Sora-chan could've come too!"

"Oniichan, have you put on sunscreen yet? Want to use mine?" She held out her tube of lotion to Yokozawa as they boarded the elevator.

"I haven't put any one, but I'm not all that worried about getting burned." He was already quite dark from all his time spent out and about on rounds, after all, and couldn't imagine it would do any good to apply sunscreen now. The bits of himself

hidden under his shirt were still fairly pale, but so long as he kept his clothes on, there shouldn't be any problem.

"You oughta put some on. Want me to do your back?"

"I'm *fine*." If he asked Kirishima for such a thing, there was no *telling* how many miles he'd take from that inch given.

"I wouldn't underestimate the beach sun, if I were you. What're you gonna do if you're bawling later about how much your sunburn hurts?"

"Who the hell's gonna be *bawling*? I'll be fine so long as I keep my shirt on. What, are you telling me you actually put some on?"

"Sure did. I'm the type to burn to a crisp when I'm out in the sun, I hate it. Plus it'd be crazy awkward to saunter in to meet authors who've been holed up in their rooms while clearly looking like I just had a *ton* of fun on vacation."

"You editors sure do have it rough—but I don't have to worry about that kind of thing, and I tan perfectly well." After all, it could prove an effective conversation starter, and many of his coworkers were already dark from days spent out golfing. There was no reason for him to feel that put out.

"...Have it your way, but don't come crying to me later."

"Mind your own business; Hiyo! Let's make sure to grab a spot on the beach first. Is there anything in particular you want to do?"

"Hmm—I wanna ride a banana boat! And then..."

He let Kirishima's warning flow in one ear and out the other, turning his focus instead to hashing out the day's plan with Hiyori.

"All right, thank you for waiting! We have one mixed berry, one *ujikintoki*, and one pineapple mango for you. Be careful not to drop them, now!"

"Thanks!"

The young man working at the seaside shop passed over their cups of shaved ice, and Hiyori merrily took them in both hands. They'd finally managed to purchase all three that they'd waited so long in line for.

"Hiyo—think you can manage to hold on to two of them at once?"

"Yup, I'll be fine! Thank goodness it wasn't sold out!"

"Indeed."

Hiyori had been the one to choose all three flavors. When Yokozawa had reminded her that anything was fine with him, so long as it was cool, she'd chosen for him. Given that the treats were flavored with not just syrup but fruit topping as well, one false step that caused a loss of balance and the whole thing would come tumbling down. It seemed that the syrups for the seasonal flavors were sold out, but as the mixed berry flavor that Hiyori had been wanting to try was still available, all ended well.

"If we don't hurry, they look like they'll melt."

"Ooh, we'd better get going then! Papa might just fall asleep waiting for us!" Hiyori had, of late, started to call Kirishima, "Father," but she still occasionally let her guard down around Yokozawa and slipped back into calling him, "Papa." She likely still wasn't quite used to the new name yet. Considering how it was actually quite adorable, this habit of hers, his mind drifted to Kirishima who'd been sleeping beneath the parasol they'd rented.

"He's been sleeping since we arrived, hasn't he?"

Kirishima had been placed in charge of watching over their things, opting for a nap over much swimming in the ocean. Yokozawa had been admittedly amazed he was able to fall asleep in such a hot location, but perhaps that just went to show how exhausted the guy had been.

"Well, Father seems like he was pretty busy this week..."

"You've got a point. He took time off for Obon, after all, so he was probably pushing himself." Before they'd set out on this vacation, Kirishima had been working at full-throttle. He'd even asked his parents to look after Hiyori for days in a row, stating that he wouldn't be home until late.

And of course, Yokozawa had been busy visiting his parents on the weekends and hurrying to finish up the work he needed to turn in after their vacation ended, so this was actually the first time the three of them had had a chance to relax and spend some time together since they'd visited that theme park before.

"I wonder...if it's my fault? Since I was the one who said I really wanted to go on a trip together..."

"Well—he wasn't working hard *just* for you, you know. It was because he wanted to go on a vacation himself—with you. It was the same for me, too. The whole reason I was able to work as hard as I did to make this happen was because I wanted to come here with you."

"Really??"

"Yup. I mean, look at how much he's sleeping—he ought to be back to full strength soon, don't you think? Let's hurry up and get this shaved ice to him."

"Right! Let's go, Oniichan!"

"Watch out—hurrying's fine and all, but don't let your feet slip in the sand and trip you up." But Hiyori only ran on, the shaved ice held firmly in both hands.

Because they'd arrived at the beach relatively late into the day, most of the really good locations had already been taken. As such, they'd had to settle down pretty far away from the beachfront shop they'd just visited, and ignoring Kirishima—who'd decided to take an afternoon nap—Yokozawa had set off to play together with Hiyori. They'd been completely mistaken for father and daughter, but that was a hell of a lot better than being mistaken for some creepy pedophile chasing after little girls, and he and Hiyori had exchanged glances every time she'd called him "Father" before collapsing into giggles.

They were planning on having a barbecue the next day, having realized that they could make reservations in advance and have all of the utensils and ingredients prepared for them ahead of time—quite convenient.

"Umm...excuse me, but...are you here alone?" Yokozawa found himself called out to as he stood there fondly watching Hiyori scamper off. As he turned to glance over his shoulder, he found a pair of brunettes, both with dark tans, standing near him. Their eyes were weighed down with dark eyeliner and false lashes, and they stared up as they batted their heavy lids at him.

“Oh—no, I’m not.”

“Then—are you here with some friends or...?”

“Ah, something...like that...”

They weren’t exactly his *friends*, but he didn’t feel the need to go out of his way to correct the misconception. Convinced the girls were simply trying to hawk some wares or something, he tried to shake them off, but he froze at the words that followed next: “Well, we’re here alone, actually, so...would you like to come grab a beer with us? We kinda brought too much with us~”

At the invitation, he finally twigged to the fact that they were *hitting on him*. Mentally shaking his head in disbelief, he politely declined the offer. “I’m sorry but—I’ve actually got a child with me, so I’ll have to be on my way.”

“Huh? A child? You’ve got a kid?!”

Hiyori was hardly his own child, but it wasn’t lying to say he was here with her. He gave a small nod before turning his gaze back to Hiyori who’d run ahead of him. She’d gained quite a lead on him while he’d been stuck here talking to these girls, and now there was a fair stretch between the two of them.

“Dammit...” He managed to spot her in the crowd and hustled to catch up with her—but just as he was about to call out to her to wait where she was for him, a group of people walking in the opposite direction bumped into Hiyori.

“Kyaa!”

“*Hiyo?!* At Hiyori’s scream and recoil, all of the blood in Yokozawa’s body rushed to his head. He shoved the shaved ice he held into the nearest trashcan he could find and rushed to her side. “Are you all right?!”

“O—Oniichan...” The gaze she turned upon him was steeped in worry, and he forced her up in an effort to calm her fears, checking her over for bumps and bruises.

“Are you hurt anywhere?”

“No, I’m fine—but the shaved ice...”

Yokozawa cast his gaze about them, only to find that the shaved ice had been completely spilled when she'd used both hands to keep herself from falling forward. While most of it had been spilled onto Hiyori herself, a bit of syrup had splashed onto one of the group's t-shirt.

"Hey, old man—'s this your kid? What're you intending on doing about *this*? She got it all over me!"

"Ah, but I..."

"You trying to make excuses, brat?!"

"Kyaa!"

Yokozawa hid Hiyori behind himself, where she stood cowering. The group standing before them were young men who still had some youth from their childhood left in their faces—but while they may have looked like children for the most part, they were obviously behaving like little punks. Just a bunch of spoiled local middle- or high-school brats.

Their haphazardly bleached hair was clearly damaged, and their ears were full of several piercings each. It was sheer luck that Hiyori hadn't been caught by one of the cheap-looking accessories gaudily decorating their wrists.

"And who the hell are *you*?"

"This kid bumped into us and spilled shit all over my shirt! You're gonna take responsibility for it, right?"

"Huh? *You're* the ones who bumped into *her*. You're supposed to do the apologizing here," Yokozawa returned, attempting to intimidate the snotty brats trying to pick a fight, and while they did quell a bit, they continued to cling to their claim.

"That's some nerve you've got when you didn't even see what happened, old man!"

"I'm speaking up here precisely *because* I saw what happened. And anyway, you should be ashamed of yourselves, threatening a little girl like this."

"Shut the fuck up! Stop making excuses and just fork over the dry cleaning fee!"

“Oh, so now we’re resorting to *extortion* are we?” He released a beleaguered sigh, realizing he’d stumbled into quite an annoying situation now, and reminded himself that this never would’ve happened if he hadn’t let himself get separated from Hiyori.

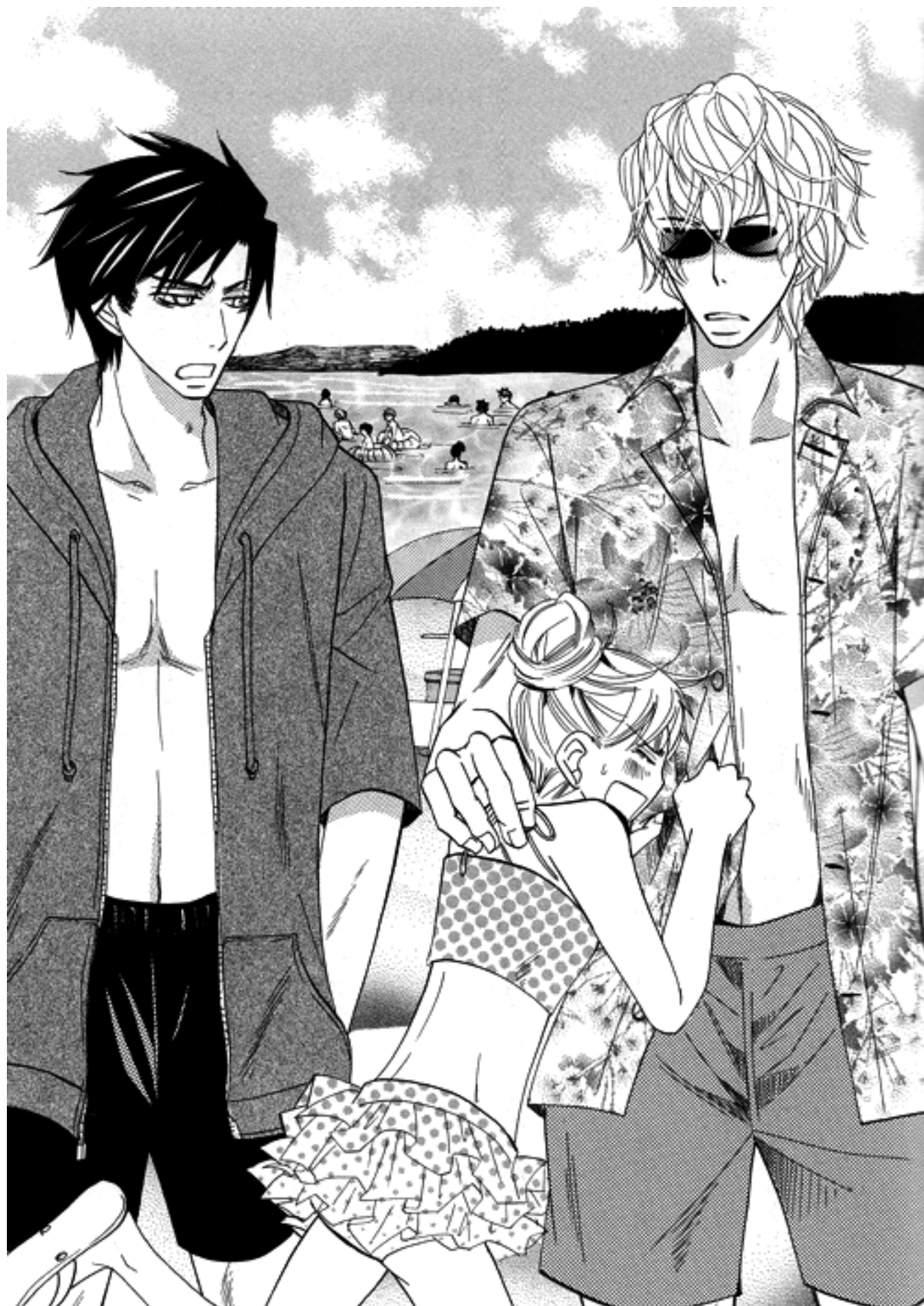
“You’ve been looking down on us since the moment you showed up—you wanna get your ass kicked *that* badly, huh?” The kid who seemed to be the group’s leader was clearly trying to cut him a harsh glare, but the more-than-ten centimeters of height separating the two of them left Yokozawa feeling more like a little puppy was yipping at him.

“You do realize that’s what they call *blackmail*, right?” He didn’t want to get *too* menacing in front of Hiyori, but neither did he want her to have to fear them any more than she already did. Had there been any lifeguards or police around, he would’ve left this to them to deal with, but unfortunately, there was no one around who looked even remotely helpful.

Then—just as he was wracking his mind how best to deal with this situation, Kirishima appeared at his side. “What’s going on, Yokozawa? Something up?”

“Papa!”

With his Hawaiian shirt and brand-name sunglasses, Kirishima looked like far from your average beachgoer, and Hiyori threw herself at him, clinging to him tightly.



“What the hell—didn’t you two just buy these?” The upturned shaved ice had already melted, turning the sand below brilliant colors.

“I dropped it...”

“No, she didn’t *drop* it—these kids *made* her drop it.”

“And who the hell are they?”

“Damned if I know. They bumped into her on purpose then blamed her for it. Sounds like they were trying to bleed some money out of her.”

“The fuck—*she’s* the one who bumped into *us*! What proof do you have otherwise?!”

“I’m a witness.”

“Someone who knows her can’t be a *witness*! Whatever, just man up and take responsibility!”

“That’ll come off with a quick dip in the ocean, for one, and *you’re* the ones who ought to be manning up in the first place, for another. Plus you owe us for three portions of shaved ice.”

“Like hell we’re paying for that!”

“Ah, I see—so you don’t have enough, is it? What’re your names? Where do you go to school, and what year are you? Can you give us your parents’ contact information, then?”

“*Huh*?! What the hell does our school have to do with anything?!”

“Well, you’re all underage. We’ll simply have to discuss the subject of your taking responsibility for your actions with your teachers and parents.”

“They don’t have anything to do with this...! Wait—hey, what the fuck are you taking our pictures for?!”

“Well, we’re filing a report with the police, so it’s best to make sure they can easily identify who we’re complaining about, right? This is just in case you decide to make a break for it, that’s all.” A moment later, the sound of three buttons being pressed on a cell phone came up, and the boys seemed to have finally realized just who Kirishima was calling.

“Th—that’s not fair! Just because you’re adults, you—!”

“Don’t you think it’s *less* fair for you to be acting like innocent children *now*? You bump into an elementary school kid and then threaten her for payment—and you still call yourself men?”

“...Asshole, spitting out a bunch of high-handed bullshit and looking down on us...!” One of the group snapped and rushed forward, fist raised to deliver a punch.

“Oops—but you’re never gonna land a punch swinging your fist around like that.”

“Dammit, stand still!”

“Owowowoww!! Le—lemme go! That *hurts*, dammit!” Kirishima grabbed the arm of one of the boys and twisted it up behind his back, and in that moment, Yokozawa flashed back to the time he’d found himself on the receiving end of such a move as well. It’d hurt like *hell*.

The remaining few followers of the group gave them a wide berth, clearly not wanting to be involved in the affair. “We’ll overlook this for now, so get the hell out of here. And you’d better not try stupid shit like this again.”

“We’re the ones who’re letting *you* off easy! You’d better be prepared next time we see you!” Obviously deeming themselves outmatched by two rather large adults, the punk kids spit out their parting words and then made off. Yokozawa watched them nearly trip over one another as they dashed off, and then let out a sigh.

“God, what a bunch of stupid brats. I’d love to see the parents responsible for *that*.”

“They probably don’t give a shit. You okay, Hiyo? You must’ve been scared.” Kirishima squatted before Hiyori and peered into her face, her expression showing she was on the verge of tears. As he caressed her head, her stiff features eased slightly.

“Only...only a little bit. But—Oniichan came right away, so I was all right. But...now we can’t eat the shaved ice because of me...” She picked up the empty cups, her shoulders slumped in disappointment. All that remained on the sand now was color left behind by the syrup and the fruit topping.

“Don’t sweat it; it wasn’t your fault. I’ll clean up here and head back to get some more shaved ice. You had some kind of berry milk something, right?”

"But—you'll have to stand in that long line again, won't you?" She directed her gaze beyond them to the snaking line at the stand.

"I'm sure it'll be my turn in no time. It went by in a flash earlier, right? Now—you don't want your bathing suit to stain, so run and take a shower with your Papa."

"All right then... Mind if I leave it to you?"

"I'll take care of it. Forget those stupid brats. None of this was your fault in the least."

"Kay." But her smile was still strained; in all likelihood she was still blaming herself deep down.

Hoping to help distract her, even just a little bit, Yokozawa opened his mouth. "Oh right, Hiyo—I forgot to mention something."

"What is it?"

"You know you said 'Papa' before, right?"

"Ah...!" Her sullen features instantly flared bright red—she definitely had done it unconsciously, then. He'd only pointed it out in an effort to get her to forget how scared she'd just been, and catching on to Yokozawa's intention, Kirishima confronted Hiyori himself.

"I have to admit, being called 'Papa' does have an adorable ring to it..."

"Th—that was just on accident, that's all!"

"And having Hiyo cling to me like that for the first time in what felt like forever...I'm just all choked up now! I thought she'd grown up on me, but she's still Daddy's Little Girl, I see."

"I *told* you I was just flustered before, really! Now—let's go rinse off, Father!" Perhaps because she didn't want anyone to see how red her face was, she puffed out her cheeks and whirled around to place her back to the two of them.

As Yokozawa bent down to pick up the cups, though, Kirishima spoke to him in a soft register, "...Thanks for looking after her."

“Only did the obvious—now get going,” he bit back curtly, in an effort to hide his own flush, but Kirishima must have seen right through him, for his shoulders shook in laughter.

“Shit...this is pretty bad...” he sighed, casting a glance over his shoulder to take in his back in the bathroom mirror—when the chime announcing someone at his door sounded. Hurrying to throw a shirt on, he checked the peephole and found Kirishima on the other side.

“Here I am~!”

“...Would you mind leaving, then?” He half-considered shutting the door again at the knowing way Kirishima announced himself, but understanding that Kirishima would make a scene if he did so, he eventually invited the guy inside with only mild disbelief.

“C’mon, I just wanted to try introducing myself like that once in my life. But now that I’m here—let’s have a drink.” Clad in one of the yukata provided by the hotel, Kirishima lifted his hand to show the bottle of *shochuu* he held. The plastic bag he held in his other hand seemed to be full of mineral water for prepping *mizuwari*.

“And what the hell is that?”

“Bought it from the shop downstairs earlier. Apparently it’s a local specialty.”

“You sure came prepared.” He’d known Kirishima had been poking around the shop, but he hadn’t imagined the guy would actually go and *buy booze*. He’d probably checked out while Yokozawa had been busy helping Hiyori pick out souvenirs.

“I brought some ice, too. And I took the liberty of borrowing some of Hiyori’s snacks as well.”

“Just make sure you buy her more later. Is she already asleep?” he questioned as he took out two glasses.

“Yup; her battery was shot the moment she got out of the bath. *Anyone* would be exhausted after playing that much. From the looks of things, she won’t wake ’til morning.” Indeed, she’d been wobbling like a ship about to sink all during dinner at the hotel’s restaurant earlier.

"She seemed like she was pretty tired even at dinner. And you too—you've gotta be exhausted from work. There's still tomorrow; why not turn in early?"

"Well thanks to a certain someone, I had a nice nap earlier this afternoon and am feeling pretty recharged. In fact—I might've overdone it a bit; I'm not tired at all now."

"You idiot—you're not a kid anymore." It seemed that while Yokozawa and Hiyori had been off playing, Kirishima had actually fallen asleep.

"Nah, it's fine. But c'mon—hang out with me for a bit here. That's an order from your superior."

"You're not my *direct* superior, you know." Sure, given their roles within the company, Kirishima *was* above him, but they were in completely different departments, and the guy was therefore in no position to be giving him orders.

"Then would you comply with an earnest request from your lover?"

"God you're annoying; if I didn't want you here, I wouldn't have let you inside in the first place."

"Ooh, what's this? I do believe you're keeping the *tsun* factor low this evening."

"Stifle it."

To tell the truth, Yokozawa hadn't been able to sleep either. With the passing hours, his sunburned skin had started to sting, and even the slightest touch sent a shudder of pain through him by now. While his face and arms, which had already been tanned, weren't all that bad off, his back—exposed to the sun for the first time this summer—was sensitive from stem to stern. He didn't expect he'd be able to sleep properly tonight at all.

"So hey—why aren't you wearing a yukata? I was looking forward to it..."

"It was too small—not like I could help it. Is that something you'd typically 'look forward to'? And—why the hell is yours so huge?" He'd hardly ever found a yukata provided by a hotel or inn that fit him, so he typically always brought his own roomwear. But taking Kirishima in once more now, the hem reached down to his ankles, and the sleeves weren't a strange length.

"The one in our room was too small, so I had it exchanged for a new one. Good thing, since I didn't bring along any pajamas. Want me to ask for one for you too while we're at it?"

"There's no point in going through the effort. It'd probably just annoy them if we asked for it at this time of ni—*oww!*" He'd tried to settle down onto the sofa, letting out a yelp of pain. He'd completely forgotten about his sunburn standing here talking with Kirishima.

"See, I *told* you to put on sunscreen!" Kirishima laughed as he downed his *mizuwari*, glancing over at Yokozawa's pained expression from out of the corner of his eye.

"I thought I'd be fine so long as I kept my shirt on..."

"Sure—but you stripped it off almost immediately complaining that you were hot. The back of your neck is beet red, too. But then—I *figured* this would happen, and I come bearing gifts." He waved around a bottle of what turned out to be cooling gel for treating sunburn. "I brought some children's stuff just in case, but Hiyo didn't seem to need any. Want me to rub it onto your back for you?"

"It's fine—I'll do it myself." He snatched the bottle from Kirishima's hands—if he were to ask the guy to do *that*, there was no telling what liberties he'd take.

The sunburn was due to burning from UV rays, so the only way to achieve any measure of relief was to just cool himself off. Pushing up his shirt, he began to apply the chilly gel to his skin. Given that it was meant for use in children, it lacked the menthol element, but it was still cool enough to feel good. However, he had to strain to reach the portions of his back most severely burned.

"I *told* you I'd do it for you—come on, give it here."

"And I said *it's fine!*"

"God you're so damn *shy*."

"I'm not *shy*, I keep telling you!" He tugged his shirt back down and twisted to hide his back. It was ridiculous—he'd been frolicking around all afternoon in nothing more than a thin pair of swim trunks, and *now* he felt awkward? In an effort to hide his embarrassment, he changed the subject of his own accord. "Still, we really should've settled things with those punks earlier. Hell, I was *gonna* grab 'em and hand them off to the cops."

“Not like we could help it. I had no idea they were wanted for other crimes, after all.” They’d contacted the authorities about the brats, which was when they’d been notified of other unfortunate incidents involving the kids. It seemed they’d been targeting children of families visiting the beach and extorting money from them. The reason they hadn’t been caught as of yet had likely been because all of their victims had been tourists, hoping to avoid any inconveniences by not submitting a police report.

Hiyori had been spooked, to be sure, but given that she hadn’t been harmed and hadn’t actually been robbed, it had apparently been difficult for the police to get involved. In an effort to do as much as they could to help, though, they’d taken the picture Kirishima had snapped of the kids.

“Hope they manage to catch them soon, if nothing else...”

“Given how they acted, I’m sure they’ll come out of hiding again shortly. They said they’d up the number of patrol officers, after all, so I doubt they’ll remain free for long.”

“...So did Hiyo mention still being spooked any since then?” That had been the only thing he’d truly been concerned about. Even if she hadn’t suffered any physical harm, she might’ve earned emotional scars. Fearing that making a big deal out of it would only weigh on Hiyori, Yokozawa had avoided touching on the discussion any.

“You showed up quickly, so I doubt she’s suffered any trauma or anything. Quite the contrary, she kept going on and on about how *awesome* her Oniichan had been. I’ve gotta admit, I actually felt a little jealous, to be honest.”

“*Excuse* me? What the hell is the point of being jealous of your own *daughter*?” he gaped in shock at Kirishima’s confession. While he initially considered that it had merely been a bad joke, it seemed that he’d actually been a little irritated. Honestly, there were *limits* to behaving like a child.

“Can you blame me? *I* wanted to see you acting all badass, too.”

“‘*Badass*’...? I didn’t do much of anything, you know. In fact, if I hadn’t taken my eyes off of her...” If he hadn’t let himself get separated from Hiyori, she wouldn’t have had to go through such a harrowing experience, he reminded himself dejectedly. Having her experience something so horrible on the trip she’d been so looking forward to had been the last thing he’d wanted.

"Maybe, but you saved her, so everything worked out in the end, right? Besides—I'm her parent, I should've been watching her myself. When you get down to it, I'm the one at fault here."

"That's—" He tried to refute the point, before realizing that this was just a circular argument. As he swallowed his words, Kirishima ended the conversation on his own.

"Let's just—stop arguing about who's at fault. You'll probably wind up kicking your own ass even if I don't say anything, after all. Besides—the real ones at fault are those punk kids."

"...You've got a point." Kirishima obviously saw right through Yokozawa, reading him like a book, and he always wound up getting the jump on Yokozawa.

"And really, I think Hiyo was more concerned with how she accidentally called me 'Papa'. Think I teased her too much?"

"If you don't rein it in, she's gonna grow to hate you, you know."

While Yokozawa had only brought up the quirk in an effort to distract her from her worries, he might have actually hurt her feelings, he was realizing.

"I'm sure it's fine. Though give it another few years and she'll probably not want to hold hands with me anymore... Ugh, I guess this means we'll have to get these family trips over with during elementary school, huh..."

Yokozawa felt his heart seize at Kirishima's obvious dejection. It seemed he was still worrying over what Yokozawa had said before—thinking that perhaps he'd gone too far, he tried to encourage him.

"...Come on, I'm sure Hiyo'll be fine."

"Hm?"

"She's crazy about you, after all—she'll never call you 'gross' or anything. Not with the way she brags about you behind your back."

"...Are you trying to cheer me up?"

"Got a problem with it?" He grew uncomfortable under the leer Kirishima was fixing upon him.

"Guess I'm really loved, huh?"

"*Don't* get carried away."

"C'mon, don't get embarrassed~"

Kirishima slapped him on the back—"Oww—!!"—and he let out a yelp of pain. The skin stinging from his sunburn was overly sensitive to even the lightest of touches. He turned a reproachful glare on Kirishima, who immediately offered a wry smile of embarrassment.

"Ah—sorry, my bad. I forgot."

"Give me a fucking *break*—if you did that on purpose I swear I'll...!" Thanks to the gel, a great deal of the stinging burn had been relieved, but the bits of his back he hadn't been able to reach still ached fiercely. At this point, it was best to just take another cool shower.

"...I'm gonna take another shower. I can't sleep like this." Granted, all of the gel he'd rubbed on would be washed away under the spray, but he hoped to use this opportunity to cool down both his body and mind.

He entered the shower room, stripping off his clothes and tossing them to the side, then doused himself with cool water from his head down. As his flushed body cooled under the spray, the pain began to lessen. Now that the pain was less intense than before, he could probably get to sleep so long as he stayed lying face-down.

He stood there letting the spray pelt him, like a monk-in-training, when he became aware of the glass door sliding open. Turning around in concern, he found Kirishima standing right behind him.



“Wha—what the *hell* are you doing?!”

“I’m getting in, too—scoot over.” He’d already stripped off his yukata and underwear, pushing his way into the shower booth completely nude, and while it was hardly the first time Yokozawa had seen him in such a state, he unconsciously averted his gaze.

“If you want to shower, use your *own* tub!” The stall was far too cramped to comfortably accommodate two men over 180 cm in height. Standing blocking the door as Kirishima was prevented anyone else from entering or leaving.

“...You’ve *got* to know that I didn’t come here for a shower, right?”

“Th—then at least wait for me outside!”

Kirishima’s arms snaked around his sides to settle at his hips, tugging him close to whisper into his ear, “I can’t wait anymore.”

“.....?!” Yokozawa’s breath caught at the confession.

“You remember I told you...you’d better prepared, right? How’d that fantasizing go?”

“Who the hell would—”

“*You* would; at least, that’s what your expression suggests.”

“I didn’t—” And he *hadn’t* really indulged in any *clear* fantasies. Indeed—he *couldn’t* bring himself to do it. He didn’t have enough experience to even *try* to imagine. Even if he had the basic knowledge of what might happen, it was difficult to place himself in such a situation.

“So...what’d you imagine?”

“I told you, I didn’t...!” He ducked his head, desperate to keep Kirishima from seeing his face—and in retaliation, Kirishima pressed a soft kiss to his nape. The skin, already flushed from the sunburn, ran even hotter now.

“I imagined all *sorts* of things myself. About what I’d do to you...”

“!!”

“But first—I’m gonna wash your body.”

“Thanks, but no thanks—I’m not a *child*.”

“Don’t worry; I’ll be sure to do things to you I’d never do with a child as well.”

“That’s *not* what I mean—” But his protests seemed to fall on deaf ears, and taking the amenity body soap in hand, Kirishima worked up a lather and slowly began rubbing it into his back. The palms brushed gently over him so as not to aggravate his sensitive skin, giving rise to brand new sensations. He struggled to bite back the sighs threatening to spill from his lips, but Kirishima’s hands continued their lewd assault.

“Geez, you’re really scorched... You’ve even got tan lines from your trunks, now.”

“Don’t—*touch* them!” He swatted at the fingers that had begun to trace along the lines around his hips but failed to deter Kirishima entirely—he ought to have grabbed him by the wrists to stop him from moving altogether. “Hey—*wait*—” Despite knowing full well it was pretty much useless to order him to stop, he couldn’t just stand here and *take* this. But as expected, Kirishima continued to press on, heedless of Yokozawa’s desires.

His fingers wriggled against him like living things, working Yokozawa to new heights, and the sensation of that combined with the smooth glide of the body soap very nearly drew Yokozawa to cry out. “Ha...ng...!”

“You know...you can be as loud as you want in here. No one outside’ll hear you. You don’t have to hold back like usual.”

“!!” Regardless of the fact that no one else would be able to hear him, he could hardly stand to let himself cry out in some humiliating tone. After all, the person he’d want *least* to hear him in such a state was standing right here.

“Cut...it *out*...”

“And what good would that do either of us? What, you gonna let me watch you jerk off?”

“Who the hell would let you...”

“I suppose you’ve got a point. I’m better at it, after all.”

“That’s not what I—” But Kirishima brushed his fingers over the tip, and Yokozawa’s spine melted. Gritting his teeth, he bit back the moan that threatened to spill from his lips—and Kirishima’s hands explored further.

If he just let all thought and logic float away, he might be able to get through this without feeling so ashamed all the time—but for some reason he was always so *overly* aware of Kirishima’s actions. Hell, *high-school kids* these days were probably more sophisticated than Yokozawa at this point.

Maybe if they hadn’t been so far apart in age, he wouldn’t be so *aware*—the way Kirishima impressed upon him the difference in their levels of experience just aggravated this complex within him.

“That’s...enough...”

“Well *that* was fast.”

“Shut...the fuck up...” His breath was coming in pants, but he at least had the strength left to spit out a curse or three.

His body he’d just cooled down under the shower spray was steadily heating up once more, and by this point, he was fit to burst with the heat welling up within him. Desperate for an end, he found himself unable to hold back anymore—and when Kirishima gripped him tightly, the space before his eyes went white. “Ha—ah...ngh!”

He met his climax eagerly, shuddering as milky white streams spurted forth. At length, his trembling eased, and he released a sigh in the wake of his climax, letting the sensations of release and languidness filter through him.

Just as he’d finally managed to get his breathing back to normal, though, Kirishima favored him with words of praise. “There’s a good boy~”

“Stifle.” The compliment that seemed more fitting for a child who’d just managed a handstand grated, and he sluggishly extended a hand to turn off the shower’s faucet. The milky strands of Yokozawa’s ejaculate mixed with the bubbles dripping down his body and swirled together into the drain, and as he stood under the chilled spray, so too did his mind start to cool down.

After several long minutes when he’d finally calmed down, he jerked his glance to the side and jolted. “...So what’re you gonna do about *that*?” Kirishima’s cock, just in his field of vision, jutted up almost comically hard and wanting, and his brazen, open

stance left Yokozawa feeling strangely embarrassed, unable to fix his gaze directly despite the fact that they were both men.

"You're gonna take care of it, of course. Now let's see...seeing as it's a special occasion, maybe I'll have you suck me off?" He reached out a hand and cupped Yokozawa's chin—and the suggestive glint in his eye and the way he traced a finger along his bottom lip sent a shudder of anticipation down his spine. "...Buuuut I'm pretty sure that'd be too tall an order. I doubt you've ever done *that*, after all."

"I—can manage that, at least," he protested reflexively. Maybe it'd been Kirishima's intention all along to challenge him into agreeing, but Yokozawa at least understood well enough that it was mostly desperation on his part. Regret immediately welled up within him, but he had no intention of taking back what he'd just vowed. "But I don't wanna hear any complaints if I'm shit at it."

He knelt in place and stretch a hand out to grip Kirishima's cock—when Kirishima, uncharacteristically flustered, responded with, "Are—are you serious?"

"You really think I'd *joke* about something like this?"

"You don't have to push yourself, seriously." The hesitant tone in his voice suggested that his earlier challenge had been little more than a teasing joke. Maybe he assumed that Yokozawa was simply tipsy right now—but he'd hardly ingested enough alcohol this evening to impair his judgment. If anything, he was probably drunk on *this trip* itself.

"Pipe down if you don't wanna get bitten," he reminded sharply, then turned his face away and clamped down on the part of him that wanted to flinch before opening his mouth widely. He laved his tongue along the underside of Kirishima's cock, licking a long stripe up the shaft to the tip.

"You're seriously...?!" Kirishima's murmurs of disbelief filtered down into Yokozawa's ears, and truthfully, Yokozawa himself was having a hard time believing how rashly he was behaving tonight.

This was the first time he'd ever attempted fellatio with anyone—while he'd never been particularly *disgusted* by the thought of doing it, any time he'd imagined himself in this situation, he'd grown faint with the sense of being overwhelmed.

"If—if it's too much for you, you can stop whenever you want, got it?"

“I told you to *pipe down*.”

He’d never had feelings for all that many people before, so while he couldn’t be entirely sure of *what* he was, he was quite certain that he wasn’t gay. He’d never been aroused by the body of just *any* random other man, after all, and he’d had a girlfriend or two as well over the years. Hell, he never would’ve imagined before today that he’d ever have reason to shove another man’s cock into his mouth.

He’d never even had it done to *himself* all that often, either, and as he recalled how Kirishima could count himself as one of those lucky few partners, he swatted away the feelings of shame that threatened to rise up and continued to insistently move his tongue around.

“Ngh...haa...”



He glanced up through lidded eyes to find Kirishima's brows knit almost painfully, his breath short and stilted—crappy as Yokozawa's technique may have been, Kirishima was obviously turned on by it, which relieved Yokozawa to no end.

Having come this far, he vowed to make the guy climax even by sheer force of will, and as he suckled eagerly on the tip, Kirishima's cock swelled within his mouth. The slide of skin against skin, the heat, the pulsing he could feel through their contact sent the blood rushing to his head.

"Nn...hng...!" The fingers Kirishima had threaded through his hair groped around to the back of his head, and Yokozawa shrugged at the lightly tickling sensation before batting away Kirishima's fingers when the attentions caused him to lose focus.

Determined now, he worked his tongue even more fiercely, desperately forcing Kirishima further and further along. But while he was quite comfortable with *starting* this whole process, he wasn't entirely clear on how to *end* it. He tried remembering the times he'd had it done to himself, but he'd always been utterly overwhelmed and couldn't recall any details.

Plus he could hardly ask the guy *right now*, and he never would've imagined he'd be struggling more with *confusion* than *shame* at this point.

After some internal debate, he decided to end it by bringing Kirishima off with his hand like usual, and gauging his timing carefully, he moved to pull his mouth away—when he found his head gripped tightly and held in place.

".....!"

Kirishima had been standing nice and quietly this whole time, but now he began to thrust down Yokozawa's throat, and just as the sensation of Kirishima's cock scraping along the roof of his mouth became nigh unbearable, his mouth was filled with spurts of a warm liquid.

"?!" He jerkily swallowed what he could, and at length, Kirishima's grip on him weakened. Yokozawa snapped his gaze up and released a hacking cough, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "The *fuck* were you...?!"

"Sorry—I couldn't help it..."

“The *hell* you ‘couldn’t help it’—you did that on purpose!” Try as he might to deny it, Yokozawa felt definite willful intent in Kirishima’s grip on him. His throat still felt as if something were scraping against it, and while swallowing hadn’t been entirely distasteful to him, the *gall* the guy had to try and pull one over on him grated more than anything.

He glared up at Kirishima, who returned an utterly unapologetic apology, “I told you, it was my fault—here, want me to do you too to make up for it?”

“Th—thanks, but no thanks!” He attempted to ease out of the booth, but his foot immediately bumped against the glass door—he *knew* there was nowhere to run.

“Now now, don’t be shy. We’ve got *all night*.”

“.....!”

His breath caught in his throat, and Kirishima took his chin in one hand, urging him forward. Yokozawa couldn’t tear himself away from that scorching gaze Kirishima fixed upon him.

The office after Yokozawa returned from his summer vacation was more deserted than usual, likely because many other employees had had the same idea and were in the midst of their own holidays right now.

“...Sure is quiet.” While it wasn’t exactly bustling with activity usually, the lack of people around meant there was hardly any noise whatsoever.

His vacation itself had been quite enjoyable—aside from the unpleasant run-in with the punk kids, he would’ve given their holiday full points. More than anything else, he was glad to have seen Hiyori really enjoying herself. He’d really worn himself out trying to keep up with an elementary school kid’s stamina, but he’d nevertheless been able to cleanly shake off all of the stress he’d accumulated on the job.

However, his one regret lay in the fact that he’d been unable to properly question Kirishima, settling instead for a petty quarrel. Even during their vacation, Kirishima’s cell phone had buzzed occasionally with incoming text messages and calls. Considering the frequency with which he typically received such attentions, it was clearly out of the ordinary. Given that Kirishima had turned off his phone

entirely partway through their trip, Yokozawa couldn't draw any conclusions after that, but he hardly believed that they'd stopped entirely.

He'd attempted to broach the subject several times, but Kirishima always just lightly brushed his concerns aside, and his stubborn attitude in turn provoked a willful streak in Yokozawa as well, hardly ideal.

Thinking back on it, perhaps he hadn't phrased his question well—the irritation he'd been unable to quash had led him to sound like he was cross-examining the guy.

"You're hiding something from me, aren't you?"

"If you want a 'yes' or 'no' answer...then I suppose it'd have to be 'yes'. But you've got a few things you're not telling me yourself, don't you?"

"Don't split hairs with me—you know that's not what I'm talking about. But there's something you're struggling with right now, isn't there?"

At Yokozawa's comment, Kirishima had offered a small smile for some reason—before responding shortly to a bewildered Yokozawa, *"I appreciate the sentiment, but even if there were some problem, it has nothing to do with you."*

He stiffened at Kirishima's phrasing, and his voice took on an unintentionally severe tone. *"Nothing to do with me? Are you serious?"*

"I'm saying it's my problem."

"So what, I'm just annoying you with my concern?"

"I never said that—just, there's no point in my telling you."

"...Fine, suit yourself!" It was the only thing he could say after being so utterly and completely shut out like that.

He'd managed to hide their quarrel from Hiyori, but she was a sharp little thing and could easily have picked up on something.

"I'm not reliable enough—is that what he's suggesting...?"

It hadn't even been a full six months since they'd started seeing one another—but this was the first time Kirishima had ever purposefully hid something from him like this. Of course, they both had their private lives and all; there was no need to be

completely open about absolutely *everything*. But this time—for some reason, he just couldn't shake this feeling that something was *off*, and that feeling gave way to worry and distrust, keeping Yokozawa from remaining calm.

He should probably just wait until Kirishima came around to feeling up to discussing whatever was going on. It was his own damn problem if he let himself be consumed with worrying 24-7 whenever something stuck in his mind, after all. Perhaps it was that immaturity in and of itself that Kirishima deemed unreliable.

“.....”

No matter how hard he tried, he'd never be able to make up for the difference in time they'd both walked this earth—and by the time he was Kirishima's age, Kirishima himself would be even further down the line. Initially, he'd never thought that the day would come when he'd be so concerned with the difference in age between himself and Kirishima. This intolerance of his was so damn *frustrating*—why couldn't he just mellow out?

While they were hardly on the outs right now, he really wanted to get rid of this awkward atmosphere between them as quickly as possible. But until they resolved the very reason they'd fought in the first place, they wouldn't be able to reach a true resolution.

“*Dammit...*” He'd arrived on the shoujo manga floor in an irritated fit. Like most everywhere else, this floor was largely empty as well, and the only one left manning the *Emerald* desks at the moment was Hatori, it seemed.

“Hey—where'd Masamune go?”

“Ah, Yokozawa-san. If it's Takano-san you're after, he's in a meeting at the moment. I'm sure he'll be back just shortly, but would you like me to take a message for him?” The fact that he didn't ask if Yokozawa would like to wait or not was likely because he understood Yokozawa's impatient nature.

“No—I'll text him myself. And, here—it's a souvenir, so feel free to share it with the other editors.”

“You shouldn't have.” He'd brought back an assortment of treats that could be found in most any tourist locale.

He was supposed to pick up Sorata this evening, after having had Takano take care of him while he was away, and had meant to inquire as to Takano's convenience while he passed out the souvenir treats when he dropped in at the *Emerald* editing department desks, but his timing was apparently off.

"Sorry for the disturbance, then." He turned on his heel to head back to the sales floor—when Hatori called out to him.

"Excuse me, but—Yokozawa-san? Could you wait for just a moment?"

"What is it?" As he turned back, Hatori rifled through his bag at his feet, eventually pulling out something and offering it to Yokozawa.

"Would you like to use this?"

"Huh?"

"It's one I used to use myself, but I figured it might be of some use to you as well, as it's got quite a few simple, easy-to-use recipes." He'd passed over what appeared to be a cookbook. From the cover and title, it looked to be aimed at beginners, and flipping through the pages, he found it to be just as easy-to-use as Hatori professed.

"This'll be a huge help—when should I return it?" Yokozawa was grateful to his consideration for remembering such a nonchalant conversation and then bringing this all the way from his house. The accompanying images of the finished dishes were all beautifully colored with great sense—this would no doubt prove a wonderful reference. He could tell from binding that this book had seen a great deal of use over the years.

"Oh, no—you can keep it. I've memorized practically all of the recipes, after all. I'd wanted to offer you a new copy, but it seems to already be out of print, so while it's admittedly not in the *best* shape..."

"Are you sure? Thanks a load—and it's in perfectly decent shape!" Sure, there were a few oil splatters here and there, but you really had to be looking for them to notice. This was Hatori, after all—there was no doubt he'd used it conscientiously.

"No thanks necessary—really, I should be thanking *you* for your help the other day. Consider it a sign of my gratitude."

"Gratitude? Did I...do something?"

“Thanks to your advice, we’ve been able to put together a new development.”

“Advice? Ah—well, that was just me being an agony aunt.” Here, he recalled their conversation in the break room several days before. It hadn’t been much, but Hatori seemed to be feeling quite indebted to Yokozawa because of it.

“And I’m sure it must have been you who brought up the issue with the production company, correct?”

“Huh? I didn’t do anything—but whatever, if everything seems to be working out, then that’s all for the best.” All he’d done was chat up a colleague working as an anime producer, and naturally he hadn’t mentioned one word about any specific titles. But the guy was a sharp one, so he might have picked up on some links between the conversation and rumors he’d heard in his line of business. If there’d been any inquiries from that man, it was only a testament to the power Hatori’s works had to enthrall others.

However, having been able to be of some help to another left Yokozawa, who’d nearly lost all of his self-confidence, feeling as if he’d dispelled some of the haze that had draped itself over him.

“Hit me up again after you’ve started settling things. I won’t spare any efforts to help.”

“I hope we can work together well, then.”

As he headed back to the sales floor, he flipped through the recipe book he’d just received, spotting a good few that looked like they’d suit a child’s palate.

“...Geez, this guy has some unexpectedly childish tastes, huh...” The pages which bore marks of having been consulted most often were largely dishes such as demi-glacé hamburger steak and meat gratin, ones typically found on children’s menus. Shaking his head in shock at Hatori’s surprising taste in food, he turned his thoughts instead to what to serve at Hiyori’s birthday party.

He’d need to start preparing now to ensure that he didn’t get flustered and mess up on the day itself. There were ingredients to purchase, after all, and he’d need to make sure to consult her friends on their likes and dislikes as well as any allergies.

He fully intended to have Kirishima help him out—despite the fact that the guy couldn’t cook worth a damn. Even if he couldn’t peel apples, he should at least be

capable of watching over a cookpot. Working as waitstaff was his job, after all, as Hiyori's father.

As he started dividing up the labor in his head, he caught Henmi's disgruntled voice. "Ah, Yokozawa-san! Where have you been? If you're going to step away from your desk, please let me know!"

"I came right back—did something happen?" He'd made his way back to the sales floor while lost in thought—and immediately braced himself for more potential trouble rearing its ugly head.

"Not 'something'—but you said you'd check over my proposal, remember?"

"Oh right—that I did. You're already finished?" He remembered now being asked for such a favor earlier that morning.

"Got it perfect this time! Oh—also, you got a phone call from one of the bookshops earlier. I took down the details for you, so please return the call."

"Will do." He took the materials, bound with a clip, from the brimming-with-confidence Henmi and checked the sticky note attached to his computer. Apparently they wanted to discuss a campaign for a comic series set to be released the month after next.

He moved to pull his planner from his bag—when he recalled he hadn't yet passed out the souvenir treats he'd bought for the sales department. "Oh right—Henmi."

"Yes?"

"Here, souvenirs. Sorry, but would you mind passing them out to everyone when you have the time?"

"Wow, thank you! We can have them as snacks when everyone's back!" And despite the suggestion of sharing them later, the guy started peeking into the paper bag. "But still—you got really tan! Did you head down to the ocean?"

"...Yeah, I guess you could say that," he returned vaguely. If it got out that he'd gone on a trip with Kirishima, there was no telling what people would start saying.

"You're pretty much pitch black! You could pass for a brown bear—or even a grizzly now! You're even *more* intimidating now!"

“...’S that supposed to be a *compliment*?” He himself had thought he’d gone a bit overboard with the tanning—but he never would’ve thought he’d find himself compared to a *grizzly bear*.

As he questioned the insistent Henmi on this point, he was returned in all seriousness, “Of *course* it’s a compliment! Maybe I’ll head down to the beach for a tan myself...”

Yokozawa had intended his tone to communicate his irritation, but it seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. Sometimes he found himself gaping in awe at Henmi’s carefree density. “You airheads are all...”

“Did you say something?”

“Forget it. Just talking to myself.”

“Huh? Wait, these look a lot like the ones I got from the *Japun* editing division...”

“What the hell are you doing poking your nose around the *Japun* desks?”

“The color proof for some campaign materials finally arrived, so I dropped by to have them look it over earlier—which happened to be just around the time that Kirishima-san was passing out some souvenir treats of his own, so I snagged one myself.”

Henmi might be thick as a brick wall when it came to picking up on people complaining about him, but he could be *stupidly* sharp in other strange respects, a fact which baffled Yokozawa.

Yokozawa had bought the souvenir he had based on price and number included in the package—treating everyone in all of the divisions required a certain base amount, after all—and this was likely the reason he and Kirishima had wound up buying similar items. Thank goodness he’d taken the extra precaution of being sure he bought something that didn’t name the location he’d purchased it from.

He suppressed his agitation, returning casually, “Well—most souvenirs look the same regardless of where they’re from, right?” His acting had improved leaps and bounds compared to before. It was hardly easy guarding a secret, after all.

Thankfully, though, Henmi didn’t seem to notice any change in Yokozawa’s expression, and he sighed to himself in relief.

“True—there are some out there that look like they’re manufactured in tourist destinations from the packaging but are actually local goods, after all. I remember this one time I went to a theme park, and when I checked the back of the souvenir treats I bought, I found out they were made in a factory not too far from my own house! I was totally depressed!”

“What difference does it make where it was manufactured so long as it tastes good?”

“You can’t say that! Souvenirs are part of the memory of the trip! Your girlfriend’ll dump you if you keep being so insensitive, you know!”

Henmi’s insistence was a bit suspicious, and Yokozawa turned a question of his own on him: “Wait—did you by any chance get dumped by some chick because you fought over something like that?”

Henmi grew clearly flustered. “Ab—absolutely not! Please don’t make such ludicrous suggestions!”

“Ooh, I get it now—I *thought* you were pretty serious over this, but now I see you’re speaking from experience!”

“I *told* you—that’s not how it is! Just—please hurry up and check over my proposal!”

“Yeah yeah...”

The fact that the guy looked to be on the verge of tears suggested to Yokozawa that things hadn’t gone well, and deeming it pitiful to keep pressing him on the subject, Yokozawa finally relented.

The moment he showed his face in Takano’s apartment, Sorata had already deposited himself inside his carrier of his own volition. While he’d never been particularly averse to entering the carrier, this was the first time Yokozawa had ever seen him take the initiative like this. Maybe he was just *that* eager to see Hiyori again—indeed, she seemed just as excited to see Sorata, texting Yokozawa only a short while ago, “*What time will you be back home?*”

“—and so, I was fighting with my wife, and when I started getting choked up before it, the youngest one intervened, see?”

“Ah, did it, now?” The taxi driver had been regaling Yokozawa with tales of his own cat for a while now. It seemed he owned two—a black and a tortoise-shell patterned one—both of which had apparently been adopted by his daughter. The guy even flashed a picture of them for Yokozawa while stopped at a stoplight.

He’d called for the taxi home in advance, before going to pick up Sorata. Most of the time, it was little issue to get the driver to let him ride with a cat, so long as it was in a carrier, but there was always the chance he might get stuck with a driver with allergies or one who just flat-out didn’t like animals. He therefore always kept on hand the number for a taxi service that allowed pets to ride.

The driver this evening seemed to be a cat-lover to the bone and started up a conversation of his own accord. While this was better than landing a driver who hated animals, his machine-gun conversation style with no signs of stopping was really starting to wear on Yokozawa.

At a break in the conversation, he fired off a text that he was about to head back with Sorata in hand, to which Kirishima returned the pithy text, */I’m about to head home, too./* They would likely find themselves arriving at his apartment at the same time.

This was the first text he’d received from the guy since they’d arrived back from their vacation. They’d been in a cold-war state of anger for a while now and hadn’t even had a proper conversation in the meantime, much less exchanged texts. The text he’d sent announcing his scheduled return time had been one sent after much thoughtful consideration, and while waiting for a response, his fingertips had frozen solid with nerves.

They likely wouldn’t be able to sit down and discuss anything until after Hiyori went to bed—and even then, Kirishima might not be up to *telling him* anything. Still—Yokozawa could at least lay his own feelings bare.

Ideally, he would have liked to be able to support Kirishima without asking him anything—to just calmly and collectedly back him up, offer casual advice, and watch over him until whatever problem plagued him solved itself.

But that was pretty well impossible with Yokozawa’s personality—he couldn’t *not* worry, couldn’t *not* open his mouth and meddle. Altering his policies like that and trying to do something that wasn’t in his nature would only wind up tearing everything to shreds.

“And me—I just keep spoiling them, so now they’re getting a little on the pudgy side, y’see. How about your kitty there?”

“It’s the same with mine. He’s on a diet right now.” Which made him recall how Takano had been shocked at how much lighter Sorata was now. It wasn’t all that obvious at first glance, but when he picked him up, he commented that he could really feel the difference in weight now.

Truthfully, though, Hiyori was the one most strict in ensuring Sorata adhered to his diet, hardening her heart and not offering him high-calorie treats. Whenever Hiyori took to fervently explaining the adverse effects of being overweight, even Sorata appeared to grow meek and quiet.

When he asked after Sorata’s demeanor while he’d been in Takano’s care, the conversation had led Takano to in turn inquire about where he’d gone on his trip, but he wound up only offering the vaguest of responses. He knew he really ought to mention his relationship with Kirishima to Takano sooner rather than later, but he still hadn’t worked up the nerve yet to do so.

It sounded like Sorata had pretty much done his own thing while he’d been staying with Takano.

“But well—fat or thing, I think my kitty’s just the cutest thing ever!” The driver’s bout of bragging about his pet ended just as they drew to a stop at the traffic signal in front of the station. While Yokozawa could hardly blame the guy, it was tiring offering the occasional filler to indicate he was still interested when the driver never let up, so he was actually quite relieved.

However, just as he’d let himself relax, the driver spoke up in a wondering voice, as if he’d just noticed something. “Hmm...? What’s this? A fight?”

“Yes, it seems so...” His gaze immediately went to a man and a woman blocking the crowd attempting to enter and leave the subway entrance. Passing it off as little more than a lovers’ quarrel in all likelihood, he let his gaze wander once more—then did a double-take.

“?!”

He couldn’t tell who the woman was—but the man was *definitely* Kirishima. It was dark, but there was no mistaking Kirishima’s tall figure. He gaped at the pair,

emotions roiling within—when they grew even *more* brazen in their fighting. The woman tried to leave, shoving her way through Kirishima and grabbing a him.

“Sorry—but could you drop me off here?!”

“Huh? Are you sure? We’re almost at your destination...”

“It’s fine! Keep the change!”

“Wait—sir?!”

He pulled a bill from his wallet at random and pressed it into the driver’s hand, then leapt from the taxi with Sorata’s carrier tucked under his arm. However, the moment he turned to check on the pair, he witnessed something unbelievable.

“Wha—?!” Kirishima flat out *disappeared* in an instant, appearing to have fallen down the stairwell after being shoved out of the way by the woman. Shrieks rose up from a group of high-school girls who’d been standing nearby, and the station front erupted in confusion.

While the woman beat a hasty retreat, Yokozawa was more concerned with making sure Kirishima was all right. “*Kirishima-san?!* ” He glanced into the stairway leading down from the subway entrance, finding Kirishima collapsed on the landing below. He darted down a few steps before dropping into a squat. “Hey—are you all right?”

“Ugh, owwww...Yokozawa? What’re you doing here...?”



Yokozawa lost his focus for a moment at the utterly ridiculous question on Kirishima's lips. He was obviously conscious, and his words were perfectly intelligible.

That it was only a short drop from street level down to where they were on the landing below was the silver lining to the dark cloud that was this whole affair. Further, as the crowd had been broken up in places, no one else had been caught up in the incident either.

"I saw you get pushed down and hopped out of the taxi I was in! But—forget that, are you all right?"

"I think I sprained my ankle, but I at least managed to not hit my head, so it's no big deal. But more so—why'd you let the chance slip by to cry out my name at such a great climactic point? You've gotta take these opportunities where they come."

"...All right, if you're lucid enough to be spouting shit like that, you *have* to be fine. I'm gonna leave Sorata here with you, so keep an eye on him." Given that he seemed well enough to drop quips, his body at least had to be fine.

He set Sorata's carrier close enough that Kirishima could see it and then raced back up the stairs, searching for the woman who'd run off—but some time had passed since then. Despite knowing that she was likely long gone by that point, though, he couldn't just sit there and do *nothing*.

"Where the hell did she..." He dashed off in the direction she'd run and turned a corner—where he found a commotion going on, with a group of people who'd apparently witnessed Kirishima being pushed down the stairs crowding around the woman responsible.

"Let me go...! Stop it! Don't touch me!"

"Calm down, there!" Just then, perhaps in response to someone calling in a report, the police from a nearby police box arrived on the scene, and at their appearance, the woman proceeded to protest even *more* violently.

"...Are you *serious*?!"

Yokozawa gaped at the scene unfolding before him: the woman struggling to free herself from their grasp to escape, with wild, unkempt hair, was *Kayama*.

Yokozawa hadn't taken in a single line from the book he'd picked up to leaf through after finding himself uninterested in anything on television, and with each turn of the page, he found himself having to go back and reread once more.

Kirishima was late coming home tonight after having stopped by the hospital with the police.

Sorata was sleeping, without a care in the world, in his usual spot. Yokozawa had tried to play with him for a bit in a futile attempt to ignore his own agitation, but perhaps the cat had seen through him, refusing to give him any quarter. Anyway—Sorata wasn't in the best of moods this evening himself, possibly because Hiyori wasn't home.

Certain that she'd only be worried upon hearing that her father had been involved in an accident, she'd been sent off to spend another night with her grandparents with the explanation that Kirishima was just working late. As such, Yokozawa had been charged with looking after the apartment with Sorata.

Glancing up at the clock on the wall, Yokozawa checked his cell phone once again for missed calls—he'd lost count of how many times he'd done so this evening.

"*God* I just can't calm down..." He released a sigh—and just then, he caught the sound of a key turning in a lock at the genkan, startling him. Lifting his head, the familiar sound of Kirishima's voice, same as always, reached his ears.

"I'm back~"

"!" He scrambled to the entrance to meet him, with Sorata at his heels, and found Kirishima removing his shoes in the genkan with little changed about him beyond the bandages wrapped around his ankle and upper arm. "Are you...all right?"

"Yup—as you can see, I'm fit as a fiddle." Thus speaking, he waved his ankle for show.

"Hey—don't overdo it. But...you're not seriously hurt, right?"

"It's just like I said in my text message—they took an x-ray, but there was no fracturing in the bone, so the doctor declared me perfectly fine. Nothing to worry

about.” Kirishima had suffered nothing more than a sprain and scrape in the wake of his fall down the stairs.

Taking Kirishima’s bag from him, Yokozawa headed back into the living room. Minor though his wounds may have been, he couldn’t let the guy just stand around all day like this.

“You want something to drink?”

“A piping cold beer, if you don’t mind—is what I’d like to say, but I figure I’d better lay off it tonight.”

“You sure as hell better. No booze for you ’til you’re all healed up.” He set Kirishima down on the couch and brought him a glass of barley tea in place of a beer.

“Thanks.”

“What about dinner?”

“I had some katsudon from a shop by the police station. Would’ve preferred delivery, myself, but it was hardly the time to be telling jokes, I figured.” It seemed that while Yokozawa had been beside himself with worry, Kirishima had rather enjoyed the situation he’d found himself in. There was a very real chance he’d knocked a few screws loose when he’d taken that tumble.

“You know—they say that symptoms from hitting your head don’t appear until well after the fact. Are you sure you shouldn’t go in for a thorough check-up?”

“I didn’t hit my head, so you shouldn’t worry yours. I made sure to brace myself when I fell; guess all the stuff I learned as a kid came in pretty handy, huh?”

“‘Learned as a kid’?”

“I took judo lessons from a dojo near my house when I was younger. Stopped before I entered middle school, though.”

“I see...” It seemed now that Kirishima’s twisting his arm up behind him and pinning him to the bed those months before in the hotel had been all thanks to his judo training. Yokozawa had been seriously worried his arm would be broken back then.

"To tell the truth, I thought it was a huge pain in the ass at the time—but I'm glad I stuck with it now."

"How about thanking your parents who made you take the lessons in the first place?"

"Point. If I'd come down on it wrong, I doubt I would've gotten by with just a sprain..."

When Yokozawa paused to think about the *what ifs* of the situation, he started to tremble again. If the guy had slammed his head into the concrete....he probably wouldn't be standing here trading quips back and forth with Yokozawa like this.

"Oh, also—don't tell Hiyo about today, please? I don't wanna worry her."

"I understand. But if you don't want her finding out, you'd better think up some way to explain how you got hurt." While he could likely hide the sprained ankle by wearing pants, there was a prominent scrape decorating the back of his upper arm, earned when he'd been shoved to the ground—rather showy for being little more than a superficial mark.

"This'll probably last for a while, huh... Think she'd buy it if I said I just fell at the office?"

"More than a little suspect, if you ask me."

"Yeah..."

He settled down next to Kirishima, who sat deep in thought as to how to explain himself to Hiyori, before resetting his posture and pointedly clearing his throat. They couldn't sit here chatting lightly like this all evening. "...So, you *are* going to explain to me just why the hell that woman attacked you, right?" Kirishima's text message had contained a brief description of what had happened, but Yokozawa had yet to hear all of the particulars of the incident.

He surmised that all of the phone calls and text messages that had been plaguing Kirishima lately had been from that woman—to put it bluntly, he'd been being *stalked*.

"...Yeah, I will," he responded with a soft sigh, suggesting that he was less than ecstatic about discussing the matter. Yokozawa, however, had no intention of letting

what had happened today pass by. After a bit of hesitation on Kirishima's part, he finally began to speak dispassionately. "...I'm pretty sure I mentioned it before, but the first time I met her was at the interview. And just so we're clear—I never once contacted her myself."

"So then—she's had her eye on you since that time."

"The way she put it, she 'felt her destiny' when she met me, apparently."

"....." Yokozawa groped for a response, falling silent. People were perfectly free to entertain such flights of fancy if they wanted, but it was a pain in the ass to have those sorts of feelings just shoved on you without your consent.

"I started getting the feeling that she was a little *off* when she invited me out for a drink after the interview. She asked me out after we'd separated from the managing editor, so I turned her down, but she kept hounding me about it, so I wound up telling her that day wasn't good for me and maybe we could do it some other time."

"And she *bought that*? Why the hell would you give her your cell phone number, then?"

"I couldn't help it! If I hadn't, she wouldn't have let me out of her sight, then. Plus—there were a lot of people around us, so I couldn't be rude to her. Couldn't have her making a scene or something. Not to mention the fact that I had no *idea* she was such a psycho..."

"True..." At first blush, Kayama looked like any normal human being, with a suitable appearance and ordinary way of carrying and comporting herself. While he'd thought the woman a bit obtuse after witnessing her conversation with Kirishima in the bar before, he never would've pegged her for the type to shove someone down a flight of stairs.

Maybe Kirishima hadn't introduced Yokozawa to Kayama...because he'd already started harboring suspicions at that point.

"I kind of assumed I could just skate by until the article went to print—which apparently was my undoing. I never imagined she'd go so far as to follow me home..."

"So, what—you mean it wasn't coincidence she ran into us at that bar?"

“Looks like it.” Perhaps Kirishima’s strange reaction to her appearance at that time had been because he’d felt uneasy around her by then. There was no doubt in Yokozawa’s mind now that she’d made up the bit about meeting a friend.

“And those letters you tried to hide from me—those were all from her?”

“Yeah—but they were mostly addressed to ‘my wife’. I mentioned I had a daughter in the interview, but I never told her about Sakura.” Sakura—Kirishima’s late wife. On hearing that Kirishima had a daughter, Kayama had undoubtedly assumed he had a wife.

“But—why the hell would she write to Sakura-san? What was in the letters?”

“Stuff like, ‘Your husband’s cheating on you’ and, ‘You’re unfit for him so step down’, that kind of thing. She even included a picture in one saying, ‘I’m more suited for him’, so it was pretty easy to figure out the perpetrator.”

“Why the hell would she go so far as to...”

“Seems like she thought she might be able to break us up. There was no way I could possibly let you or Hiyori see that kind of shit—but if I threw it away, I’d lose the evidence, and I couldn’t just leave it lying around the house, so I took to carrying it around with me. Which was a good thing, as I was able to hand it over to the police straight away.”

Yokozawa was at a loss for words at the way this whole affair had unfolded like some cheap suspense drama. This was above and beyond Yokozawa’s assumptions, positing the letters as love notes or similar.

“She was a real piece of work, huh...”

“Plus—turns out this wasn’t even the first time she’d done something like this. The police were saying she was probably gonna find herself committed this time.”

“Committed?!” Yokozawa’s eyes widened in shock at the far-from-gentle language. While her acts most certainly counted as assault in the eyes of the law, Kirishima had only suffered minor injuries from her attack. He’d assumed she’d get off with little more than a fine for something like this.

"She's taken to stalking men who broke up with her before, even going so far as to hurt their new girlfriends. She saw us together—but I doubt she assumed that I'd be dating a guy."

"Most *wouldn't*." Few people would ever assume that a man of Kirishima's age with a kid of his own already would be dating someone of the same sex.

"I didn't catch all the details, but it seems like when it comes to romance, she starts to lose the ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality. When her folks heard about it from the police, they rushed over and apologized over and over."

"I see..." Yokozawa recalled now that yeah, even people who make trouble for others have parents and family of their own, and as he paused to consider Kayama's parents' feelings, his chest clenched with pain. How many times must they have had to deal with such anxiety before this...?

"Well—at the very least, I'm glad I was her target. I feel faint just imagining what might've happened if she'd set her sights on Hiyori... Maybe I should have her start taking some lessons..."

"It'll probably take a load off your mind if you're sure she knows how to defend herself." It scared the shit out of him, not knowing what she might have done to a young girl after having lost the ability to differentiate between fantasy and reality. If Kirishima hadn't been the one who'd been shoved down the stairwell, things might've been even worse.

There would always be people out there—like those punks from before—who would target the weak, even if Yokozawa was always on his guard, and while everything worked out for the best since he was around at that time, he shuddered to think of what might have happened had Hiyori been alone.

With age, she'd find herself out on her own more and more often—but they couldn't just lock her away because they were worried for her. As such, they likely had little choice beyond ensuring she knew how to defend herself.

"But then—why the hell wouldn't you just *come out and say* this kind of shit to me?!"

"Well—I couldn't be 100% sure for one thing, and if it all wound up being my getting worked up over nothing, that was for the best. I didn't want to worry you over something I wasn't even sure of."

“Well whether you tell me or not, I’m still gonna worry! You really think I’m *that* unreliable?!” While he could understand where Kirishima was coming from, professing that he hadn’t wanted to worry Yokozawa, he still couldn’t accept this. Maybe he couldn’t have been blamed for wanting to protect his wife or child in that situation—but Yokozawa was a *man*, and one who needed no such protection, at that.

He opened his mouth to deliver a complaint on the matter—when Kirishima responded with an abashed expression, hesitation in his voice, “I just...I didn’t want to look...so pathetic in front of you.”

“.....what.”

“Not being able to deal with one chick? Lane beyond measure. That was why I’d *planned* on explaining everything to you after I’d taken care of it all.”

Yokozawa gaped in shock at Kirishima’s remarks—being a conceited show-off was all well and good, but the guy *really* needed to rein it in sometimes. He couldn’t stomach the fact that he’d been wracked with worry all this time just for Kirishima’s *pride*.

“Are you an *idiot*? I’d never think you were *pathetic*, no matter what you did,” he spat out, admission mixed with a sigh.

Kirishima froze in place for a moment before returning stupidly, “...Would you mind saying that again? Just once more?”

“Huh?”

“I’m gonna record it this time—so say it again for me?”

“You *idiot*!” he roared in response as Kirishima pulled out his cell phone to activate the voice-recorder function. “No—you only get it *once*!”

He was less than thrilled to have his seriously offered admission made fun of. That wasn’t the kind of thing one worked the nerve up to say too often, and he definitely didn’t want it recorded. He obviously wasn’t going to get through this day with one sigh, that much was clear.

Irritated, he stood and headed into the kitchen to get himself a beer—when arms were wrapped around him from behind, pulling him into a tight hug. “...!”

"I'm sorry. I really am—truly sorry."

Yokozawa's frustration faded away in the wake of the honest sincerity laced in the apology, completely different from the light-hearted tone Kirishima had wielded before.

He caught sight of the bandage wrapped around Kirishima's bicep in his peripheral vision, and a confession practically dropped from his lips, "...The moment I saw you get shoved down those stairs...I felt like my heart stopped."

"Yokozawa."

His mind had gone completely blank in that moment—sending him plummeting into a void of anger and despair, like his whole world had ended. He'd only been able to recover his composure after seeing that Kirishima was all right.

He pressed his hand over Kirishima's wrapped around him. "Even if I can't help you—*tell* me these things. Though admittedly, I'm sure you'd make do on your own."

He *never* wanted to go through that again. Maybe he couldn't be of much help—but he could still *be there* for him, a staff to lean on to keep him from falling.

Before, Kirishima had said that if he ever found himself in trouble, he would *wait and trust* in Yokozawa. But Yokozawa was *through* just standing around blindly.

They were *together*—and that meant he wanted to share not only the happy times, but the tough ones as well. Wasn't that what it meant, sharing your life with someone?

"I'll be sure to discuss it with you properly next time."

"You sure as hell better not forget that." The slightly scolding tone laced in his words were likely due to some lingering feelings of sulking irritation, and he smiled bitterly to himself at his childish behavior.

"...I promise." And with his words, Kirishima tightened his arms around Yokozawa even further.

Yokozawa squeezed his eyes shut and released a long breath—at last able to relax the stiffness lancing through his body.

“Yokozawa-san—everyone’s going out to eat together after this. Would you like to join us?” Henmi called, glancing up from his cell phone as Yokozawa prepared to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“The same shop as always. I’ve got a coupon—but it expires at the end of this month, so. Oh—and if you go in a group of four or more, you get an even bigger discount, so we’re gathering a group together.”

“All right then—I’ll stay for a bite. But just so you know—I’m not treating you.” With the vacation retreat, he’d spent quite a bit more money than he’d planned on this month, and while he would’ve liked to have played the indulgent sempai, he had to hold off until payday.

“Yes yes, I *know*. Everyone’s wallets are feeling a bit lonely around this time of the month.”

“Is everyone ready to head out?”

“Three have responded so far—ooh, wait, might have caught another...” Henmi’s cell phone flashed brightly, likely indicating a response from another person he’d invited out to eat.

“...Hm?” From Yokozawa’s bag as well, his cellphone buzzed in manner mode to indicate an incoming message. He scrambled to pull it out, checking the display—only to find it was Kirishima calling. If he recalled correctly, the man had said he’d be out of the office on meetings with an author today, so it was odd of him to go out of his way to call Yokozawa at a time like this. “Yes, Yokozawa speaking,” he answered, tone suspicious, and the voice that came back to him sounded a bit frantic.

“*Hey—can you speak right now?*”

“I was about to head out to grab a bite for dinner—what’s wrong?”

“*Sorry, but could you come meet me?*”

“And I asked you *what’s wrong?*” Kirishima’s attitude seemed a bit different from usual, sending a chill through his chest. Maybe he was wrapped up in more trouble like before—his mind was filled with nothing but thoughts of worst-case-scenarios.

“I’ll tell you when you get here. I’ll text you where to meet, so just get your ass over here ASAP.”

And leaving Yokozawa no room to protest, he cut the line, the only sound still echoing from the cell phone receiver the robotic drone of a phone line being cut.

“What’s wrong?”

“I...don’t really know.” Yokozawa had merely been called out with absolutely no further details given. And yet—he couldn’t imagine that Kirishima would call like that for no reason whatsoever.

“Who was it from?”

Not bothering to respond to Henmi’s question, Yokozawa stood, bag and coat in hand. “Sorry—I’ll have to join you for dinner some other time.”

“Wha—Yokozawa-san?!”

There was no point in sitting around here wracking his mind over the matter, so tamping down any feelings tending toward worry and anxiety, he dashed off to the address included in the text message he’d just received.

“That...was as tasty as all the reviews touted this place to be.”

“True—it was definitely delicious...but are you sure you don’t want me to pay for anything?”

“I keep telling you—it’s my apology for worrying you. Just sit down, shut up, and let me treat you.” Kirishima’s ‘emergency’ had turned out to be little more than a way to get Yokozawa to join him for dinner. Truthfully, this was supposed to be a reception for an author—but the author’s condition had been a bit dubious, so they’d parted ways after having a simple discussion meeting. Then it had simply been decided that if they were going to have to pay to cancel everything anyways, they may as well just

enjoy the meal. In that way it had been decided that the pair would have dinner together.

So while there had indeed been *some* form of trouble, the whole thing had been somewhat anticlimactic to Yokozawa, who'd rushed over *certain* that something horrible had happened. But it seemed the entire point of not explaining why he needed Yokozawa to come had been purely to *convince* Yokozawa to come—so the plan had apparently worked.

Still, if things hadn't worked out the way they had, they'd likely never have found themselves sitting here enjoying dinner in a three-star restaurant of a high-class hotel like this. Yokozawa had been a bit starstruck initially, but he'd found himself able to settle down and enjoy the meal, nonetheless.

Their reservations had them sitting at a table near the windows, looking out over the nighttime scenery. They were surrounded on all sides by couples sharing meals together, which left Yokozawa feeling more than a little awkward, so he settled for pretending he was simply there on business.

He'd told himself that the only reason he'd been called out like this was likely because Kirishima had hoped to lessen the financial impact of having to foot the bill for such a high-priced dinner, but Kirishima had settled the bill entirely on his own. When Kirishima refused to even tell him the total, Yokozawa had tried to get him to take what he figured was about what his half of the meal had cost, but he'd been turned down.

"Hey—where are we going? This isn't the lobby floor yet," he protested when the elevator drew to a stop, figuring Kirishima must have accidentally pressed the wrong button. He tried to call Kirishima back into the car as he stepped out onto one of the floors for the hotel's guest rooms, but Kirishima simply turned to regard him, making no efforts to get back in the elevator.

"This floor'll do fine."

"...What're you talking about?"

"Can't you at least just do what I ask when we're out on a date?"

"Huh? What the hell are you talking about—a *date*?" He grew confused at the strange choice of words, before scrambling to catch up to Kirishima, who resolutely plodded ahead.

"A date's a date, you know. Now—after you, my good sir." Kirishima swiped a card key to open the door of a room marked 2411, pressing the door open to invite Yokozawa inside.

"...And just *why* do you have a hotel room key?"

"Stop asking questions and just *get inside*." At Yokozawa's suspicious expression, Kirishima pressed his back to force him into the dark room, and the lights flickered on immediately at this, illuminating everything in a soft glow. Given the expansive roominess, this was likely a rather high-grade room, and that his thoughts immediately drifted toward *I wonder how much this place runs a night...* was testament to the fact that he was indeed a commoner.

"What—did you reserve this room for the author as well? You sure you shouldn't have just canceled the reservation for the room at least, if not the meal?"

At Yokozawa's comment, Kirishima released a beleaguered sigh. "Would you get a fucking clue already? Why would they put up one author staying a single night in a two-bed room?"

"Wait—you mean you actually reserved this room *yourself*?"

"Well, I figured it was a wasted opportunity to eat dinner in such a nice hotel and then go straight home, right? Plus, it's kinda nice—all romantic like this."

"...You're such an idiot," he muttered in shock at Kirishima, who winked at him knowingly.

"Says the guy who'd never book a hotel room with me if I didn't pull stunts like this."

"So then—was all that tripe about not wanting to cancel dinner just another excuse?"

"Nah—that was real. But what an opportunity, right? I figured it was worth it and booked a room while I was waiting for you. Ooh—check it out. Pretty rare for them to be shooting off fireworks at this hour..."

Yokozawa glanced out the window, following Kirishima's own gaze, and in the distance he could see fireworks being launched into the air. The sight of fireworks blooming against the night scenery amidst the hills and valleys of the skyline was refreshing.

“What festival are those for? A little late for fireworks, isn’t it?”

“Given the area—probably Kuma Park, don’t you think? They always shoot them off before closing the park every day.” At this explanation, Yokozawa recalled how they’d visited the park—just the three of them—at the beginning of the month. They’d left before it was time for the fireworks display, but they’d promised Hiyori they’d come back to watch them together some other time.

“...Wait—stop trying to change the subject. We could’ve easily made it home in a half hour, so why the hell are we stuck spending the night at a hotel like this?”

“C’mon, it’s fine—I just wanted to be able to relax and talk with you.”

“You can do that just fine at home.”

“Hiyo’s at home, though.”

“Then we could do it at *my* place.”

“Yeah—but you’re a hell of a lot more open and honest when you’re dropped in an unfamiliar situation. You’ve been hassling me all this time—but you’re hiding something from me as well, aren’t you?”

“Me? Hiding something? What the hell are you on about?”

“You’ve just...lately you’ve been looking like you really want to tell me something.”

“That’s...” And here, he realized on his own what this *something* was that he was supposedly hiding. Except he wasn’t actually *hiding* anything, per se—it was only...he couldn’t find the right moment to address it.

“...What, it’s something you can’t discuss with me?”

“It’s not that I *can’t*—I just...never could bring it up, that’s all.” Hell, he never would’ve imagined that the very person he wanted to press on the issue would in turn press *him* for an explanation. But—maybe this was a good chance; without it coming to this, he would’ve admittedly found it difficult to broach the subject on his own. “The whole...marriage interview thing. It was bugging me, that’s all.”

“Huh?”

"I heard from one of the girls at work—that a superior of yours brought up the subject of a marriage interview with you. And how since it was the daughter of a prominent business associate, you couldn't turn it down..." And while it may have seemed like an incredibly big deal to Yokozawa at the time, putting it into words like this was...just embarrassing. It was pathetic how he'd gotten so worked up over a simple marriage interview request.

At his admission, Kirishima gaped at him in confused shock for a long moment—before at last releasing a loud explosion of laughter. "What the *hell—that's* what you've had your panties in a twist about? Ah, I get it now—that explains why you've had this weird expression on your face all this time..."

"Don't—fucking laugh at me!" he snapped at Kirishima who continued to laugh at Yokozawa's expense.

"You're such an idiot—I turned that interview down *ages* ago. I didn't even look at any pictures of the woman."

"Then—you should've said so sooner!"

"I just never thought it was something I really needed to go out of my way to bring up. My superior suggested it and I turned him down on the spot. Plus—I had no clue those kinds of rumors were floating around. Who the hell did you hear about it from?"

"Don't remember—some chick." He'd been completely preoccupied with the words *marriage interview* at the time—he'd lost all composure. Looking back, it was shameful how thoroughly he'd lost his presence of mind over little more than office gossip.

"Well—the women in my division certainly do like to gossip, and it's not like I went out of my way to try and keep it under wraps, so I suppose someone might've picked up my mentioning it in passing."

The fact that he'd been so shaken upon hearing about the marriage interview made it seem as if he'd been distrustful of Kirishima himself—and worried that he might have offended Kirishima in his way, Yokozawa hastened to explain himself, "I mean—don't think that I was doubting you or anything, all right? It just...bugged me that you hadn't said anything about it, that's all..."

“Yeah, I know. I understand well enough that it wasn’t because you didn’t trust me. You really have next to *no* self-confidence, you know?” Yokozawa swallowed thickly as Kirishima hit the nail on the head—and as he ducked his head in shame, he found himself wrapped in a sudden embrace.

“.....!”

“I know how you feel. I mean, I worry sometimes too...”

“You do?”

“Sure—I mean, it’s not like I’m psychic and know immediately what you’re thinking or anything. Even if I can divine some things by your expression, I can’t really see deep down, underneath everything.”

“.....”

Kirishima settled his forehead against Yokozawa’s shoulder, confession falling from his lips in a forlorn voice. “I’m still...not really sure of how you feel about me. You’ve never just...come out and *said* it, after all...”



“That’s not—” *true*, he started to protest, before realizing that indeed, he’d never spelled it out in so many words, and his chest clenched at the somewhat lonely expression on Kirishima’s features.

He always ran away, every time—and if in doing so he’d somehow hurt Kirishima, then he truly had never meant it.

“...Being human sucks some times, huh. I guess I just...assumed that being with you like this was good enough, but it only made the grains of worry build up over time...”

He’d been so happy—and that was *frightening*. Gaining something great also brought with it a great price to pay. He knew fully well that his attitude could easily fill Kirishima with doubt and worry—and while his actions were by and large merely attempts to hide his embarrassment, it couldn’t have felt nice for the guy to have his advances rebuffed again and again.

“Well—just, I mean...it’s not like I’m trying to get away from you because I hate you or anything. I do honestly...ve...you...” His voice was so low and soft that the most important part was nearly unintelligible, but it was the first time he’d every voiced his feelings aloud.

He stood there tamping down embarrassment that threatened to boil over—when Kirishima glanced up, grinning so happily it made his previously dejected state seem like a lie. “...You *finally* said it.”

“...You...just...” Realizing that the entire ‘depressed mood’ had been an act, Yokozawa felt like he could just drop dead with anger right there. Blood rushed to his head—too quickly—and he found himself groping for words.

Kirishima, in turn, confessed without pretense, “And *I* love *you*, too,” grin so wide he seemed on the verge of tears, leaving Yokozawa speechless. Maybe Kirishima’s penchant for teasing was like Yokozawa’s vain attempts to hide his embarrassment—it was too much to handle, so he covered up his shame with teasing.

“That...was *not fair*,” he spat back spitefully—but Kirishima’s response was calm and collected:

“You’ll find that adults rarely play fair. You’re the same yourself, right?”

“I’m not as bad as you, at least.”

“Well, that’s just a matter of age and experience.”

“You know—I’ve been thinking this for a while, but I’m pretty sure your elders would pitch a fit if they heard how often you play the age card at *your* age. Cut it out.”

“It’s fine—I pick and choose my moments carefully.”

“Yeah right—you’re always quick to toss it out whenever you damn well please.”

“Maybe—but so long as it *sounds* like I gave it some thought...”

“Don’t shatter the dreams of your subordinates, now.” If any of the underlings who worshiped Kirishima heard that confession, they’d probably be crushed.

“You’re the only one I ever tell how I really feel, you know. And you think I’m awesome no matter what, right?”

“...That’s not something you’re supposed to say *yourself*!”

“Not like I can help it—I mean, you wouldn’t say it again for me, so...” Kirishima announced peevishly, a childish pouting tone in his voice. For every moment he acted older than he truly was, there was one when he could behave more immaturely than Hiyori. Yokozawa occasionally found himself shocked at the behavior, but these were undeniably all pieces making up the puzzle that was Kirishima.

Adulthood was not something reached simply by aging—you matured by struggling and surmounting obstacles—and it was precisely because of that childish side Kirishima showed him now and then that they were now able to spend their time together like this. If Kirishima had been an impeccable, perfect human being, Yokozawa would have likely given in to his pessimistic nature and long since broken down.

Perhaps the final one of the show, a huge, flashy firework shot into the air, and taking in the glinting traces of light dotting the night sky, Yokozawa recalled that this was far from an ordinary setting.

Sometimes the guy deserved to have his wish granted, and Yokozawa gave voice once more to the words Kirishima had requested from before: “...You really are pretty awesome.”

At this, Kirishima's face reddened right before his eyes. "That's... It's no fair pulling something like that on me when I'm not prepared."

"I learned from the best," Yokozawa returned, quite satisfied that his attempt at revenge had surprisingly succeeded. There'd likely be hell to pay for it later—but he'd cross that bridge when he got to it.

For his part, Kirishima simply turned a gaze of clear intent on the self-satisfied Yokozawa.

Kirishima, always ready with some needless quip on his tongue, was unexpectedly tight-lipped tonight, leaving the room filled with only bitten-back moans and rising sighs.

Fingers groped over Yokozawa's chest, occasionally finding purchase on a nipple and teasing, but joined to the body behind him as he was, he couldn't muster much strength. Conscious thought very nearly left him entirely in the wake of the tireless rhythm worked into his body.

"Haa..."

The fingers dipped down to wrap around his stiff cock, but the condom he'd slipped on to keep from dirtying the linens kept him from enjoying the sensation of direct skin-to-skin contact, serving only to irritate and frustrate.

He buried his face in the plush pillow beneath him, biting back the sounds which threatened to spill from his throat—and perhaps displeased with this action, Kirishima tightly tweaked the nipples he'd been teasing.

"Ow—!"

"Make those sounds—like you did last time."

"Like...*hell*..." He most definitely did not appreciate Kirishima making it sound like he'd been desperately moaning and gasping—it had only been that their location had made his voice reverberate more than usual. "Ha...ah—!"

Kirishima plied his body with punishing strokes, and sighs he could not hold back fell from his lips. Pressed to the edge, he felt himself melting from the inside out—

yet still he stubbornly dug in his heels, refusing to give up his pride to the bitter end. He was already having that pride shoved aside as he was being fucked here—at the very least, he hoped to get by without falling apart at the seams.

But then—as if ridiculing this trivial attempt at stubbornness—Kirishima whispered his name into his ear in a soft breath, “*Takafumi...*”

“.....!”



In that instant, all of Yokozawa's senses grew defenseless—undoubtedly Kirishima's aim, for he resituated his grip on Yokozawa's hips and stepped up the pace of his thrusts, leaving Yokozawa unable to dispel the lingering doubts at the back of his mind.

The sensation of teeth scraping along the nape of his neck was the final straw, pushing him over the edge. "Ngh—!" The space before his eyes flickered blindingly, and by the time his senses returned, he found he'd spurted out the evidence of his passion, his stomach quivering beneath him.

Climax passed, Yokozawa's cock grew flaccid, and as he worked to settle his haggard breathing, Kirishima wordlessly withdrew from him in one swift stroke. "Wha—?!" He had little freedom to mourn the sudden sense of loss as Kirishima separated from him, though, quickly finding himself shoved over onto his back. "What the *hell* are you—"

He didn't even have time to finish his protest before Kirishima pressed his legs apart and penetrated him anew. "Ah—!" His voice pitched upward in surprise as he'd let his guard down, and he quickly clenched his jaw, gritting his teeth against the sensation of penetration. As Kirishima practically mounted him, he found himself sinking into the bedsprings. "A little...warning...would be appreciated..."

"I never said we were finished. Besides—I definitely prefer being able to see your face..."

"What's the fun in watching...?" The only light still on was a footlamp at the foot of the bed, but with their eyes having adjusted to the dim lighting, they could easily make out each other's expressions—and that leer on Kirishima's face was irritating as hell.

"Not so much *fun* as a huge turn-on. Makes me hot, seeing you all pissy like this."

"Fucking pervert."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Plus you're not much better—getting off on this pervert fucking you."

"Shut up." He was hardly in any position to refute the accusation, so he settled for turning his face away. He couldn't keep up with Kirishima's banter anyways. The fact that he continued to rise to these challenges despite knowing fully well that he couldn't compete with the guy was nothing more than sheer willful pride.

"I *love* you." The random confession was likely revenge for Yokozawa's earlier quip—and here Yokozawa was, with nowhere to flee and no way to plug his ears, both hands restrained as they were.

"Don't...have to come out and *say* it..."

"Just thought I'd make sure you knew."

"You never know when to quit..."

"And I don't *plan* on quitting—*all night*..." he returned lewdly, a knowing smile playing on his lips.

He'd been busy since morning today because it was finally the day of Hiyori's birthday party. There were six guests scheduled to participate, so Yokozawa had to prepare enough food to feed seven in total; and while it hadn't been easy to concoct a menu featuring food that was both easy on the tongue as well as on the eyes, after consulting the cookbook that Hatori had given him and discussing ideas with Hiyori, he'd finally managed to pull it off. He'd even cooked up a practice batch of the most difficult dishes the previous day and gotten passing marks.

"I bought the cake!" came Kirishima's voice from the genkan as he arrived back home.

"Stow it on the top shelf in the refrigerator. I've left some space for it."

Kirishima had been placed in charge of picking up the cake they'd reserved for Hiyori's birthday—and with that done, he'd now be on hand helping wait on the guests once the birthday party started. It'd be a great chance for him to show off that characteristic charm of his.

"I also took the liberty of buying some flowers as well—won't hurt to have a splash of color, now will it?"

"Well *that's* surprisingly thoughtful of y—" Yokozawa started to return casually when his breath caught in his throat as he took in the sight of Kirishima standing before him, a bouquet of so many roses in his grasp they looked like they were about to overflow his arms.

While such a bouquet might not have suited Yokozawa himself, they made one *hell* of a portrait with Kirishima. “Most of the buds were open already—so they cut me a deal on them. They smell great, don’t you think?”

“...Y—yeah, they do.” He quickly busied himself, frantic to ensure that Kirishima not notice his agitation as he stood there captivated, when Hiyori poked her head into the room, having finally finished changing clothes.

“Welcome back, Father! Wooooow, what’s what all these flowers?!”

“They’re a present—for you.”

“Huh?? For me?? But—I already got a birthday present from you...?” The dress decked out in sailor colors that she was wearing right now had been Kirishima’s present to her; they’d gone out to buy it together just for the party today.

“Nah, you’re allowed as many presents as you want! They’re pretty, don’t you think? Here, go put them in a vase before everyone gets here. Oh, and set some over by your mama, too.”

“Kay! Thanks, Father!” Her cheeks flushed darkly at the happy surprise, and taking up the roses with a smile that nearly split her face, she darted off to the washroom where the vases were stored.

“I’m gonna go get changed too; I’m drenched in sweat, and it wasn’t even that much of a walk. May as well grab a shower while I’m at it.” With that, Kirishima headed off to his bedroom, fanning his chest.

“.....”

Actually, Yokozawa had something he wanted to tell Kirishima today, and while it might have been best to leave it until after the party, he couldn’t keep calm with the decision to speak lodged firmly in his throat.

He chased after Kirishima, delivering a knock on the door, and when granted admission, he softly slipped into the room. Deeming it best for Hiyori not to overhear this conversation just yet, he made sure to shut the door behind himself.

“What’s up?” came Kirishima’s voice from the closet as he rifled through his wardrobe to find a new shirt, and after a moment’s hesitation, Yokozawa finally came to the point.

"I wanted...to discuss something with you."

"Discuss something? Does it have to be right now?"

"Well—no, I mean, we can discuss it any time, I imagine, just..." It was less a matter of timing and more a matter of Yokozawa's own resolution. If he didn't get this over with while he'd resigned himself to doing so, he'd wind up losing his nerve. "Have you...already gone and done your gravesite tending for the year?"

"Yeah. What of it?"

He swallowed thickly and took a deep breath. "Then... Just, it doesn't have to be *right now*, and I won't press it if you're not comfortable with it, but...if you wouldn't mind...could I...maybe go with you, some day?" Kirishima's eyes flashed wide at Yokozawa's words, and shaking off the urge to back down, he forced himself to continue in a deluge of explanation, "It's only—see, I really...just want to introduce myself properly. Like—to make it clear, I guess? I mean, I'm sure she's worried about Hiyo, after all, and I want her to...understand that I'm not...not here with half-assed feelings or anyth—"

But Kirishima's hands shot out, gripped him by the head, and dragged him close; and with protests on his tongue, Yokozawa instantly found Kirishima's lips sealed over his own. "Ngh—mm—!" He was shaken for a moment at the sudden assault, but he quickly recovered his senses and shoved Kirishima back. "What...the *hell* are you..."

"Sorry, I just—was kind of overwhelmed, and it went to my head...!"

"React like a *normal person* then!" He rubbed at his mouth with the back of one hand, conscious of the lingering sensation of Kirishima's lips on his own, then abandoned his seat and placed a bit of space between himself and Kirishima. He couldn't afford to be this careless.

"Seriously, though—you made me...so fucking happy. I'd love for you to come! And Hiyo would too!"

"...I certainly hope so, at least." He'd never really discussed Hiyo's mother with her—in part because he'd never had much opportunity, but also because it was a rather delicate subject, one not typically broached in day-to-day conversation.

"I guarantee it. And—yeah, we could bring Sorata along, too. She always wanted a cat, after all." Selfish though the request may have been on Yokozawa's part, Kirishima seemed to be more than thrilled to receive it, which was no small relief.

"So Hiyori got her love of cats from her mother then, huh?"

"Maybe. I always wanted a huge dog, myself, but it's tough, living in an apartment like this; and then there's my job, too."

"True; big dogs need a hell of a lot of exercise." With Kirishima's workload right now, there was no way he'd have the time for it. Plus, once Hiyori started middle school, she'd get even busier.

"I'll save it for retirement. I've got my hands full with a certain wild bear right now, after all."

"*Oi*—when you put it like that, it makes it sound like *you're* the one who has to take care of *me*." And maybe that was true in a sense in the workplace, but in private, Yokozawa was the one at wits' end looking after Kirishima.

"It's a figure of speech, that's all—don't get pissy."

"I'm not getting *pissy*."

And as they stood there bickering, they caught Hiyori's voice calling them from the kitchen: "*Oniichan! I think the pie's finished!*"

"All right! I'm coming!" Yokozawa froze for a moment, realizing they'd just been entertaining a rather dangerous conversation, but Hiyori shouldn't have been able to overhear them. Leaving Kirishima to his devices in his bedroom, Yokozawa hurried back to the kitchen.

"See? It's all finished baking, right?"

"Looks that way. Should be fine, given that it looks nice and crispy." The meat pie seemed to have turned out not half bad after baking.

Except for using a pre-packaged frozen pie crust, this was something he'd worked to make together with Hiyori. He hadn't been too sure about asking the birthday girl to help cook the food for her own party, but Hiyori herself seemed to be having a wonderful time in the process, so he decided not to get too worked up over it.

“The oven’s still hot so be careful not to touch.”

“Yessir~”

Wondering what was next on the list of things to do, Yokozawa consulted the schedule he’d taken the liberty of drawing up beforehand when the doorbell rang.

“Don’t tell me people are already arriving...?” They still had over an hour left until the party was supposed to start. If any friends of Hiyori’s had been hasty in their arrival, he wanted to at least have cleaned up the parts of the house they’d see.

“I don’t think so. I made sure to tell everyone we’d start at 1 PM.”

“Maybe it’s a delivery or newspaper fundraising push. I’ll go check, so you set the table, all right?”

“Will do!”

Kirishima was typically the one to answer the door, but he’d headed into the bathroom just before, and Yokozawa could hardly call the guy out in the middle of his shower. Glancing into the monitor, he saw a rather nervous-looking boy staring back at him, and after a moment’s confusion at the unexpected arrival, he pressed the ‘on’ button of the speakerphone.

“Yes, who is it?”

“Umm, I’m...Iokawa, from kirishima-san’s class! Is...Kirishima-san available to speak?”

“...Wait just a moment, please.” He held off from answering one way or the other—he was quite certain they’d only invited girls to the party, so maybe this was some sort of mix-up?

He considered checking in with Kirishima before calling Hiyori over, but he didn’t seem through in the bathroom just yet, and so he decided to confirm the boy’s business himself in the entryway.

“Please excuse the wait—could I ask what brings you here today?” As he stepped outside, he found a young man and a boy around elementary school age standing in front of the gate where the interphone was situated. The boy was very obviously frozen stiff with nerves, and that behavior suddenly *clicked* with Yokozawa.

The kid must've had a crush on Hiyori and the birthday of someone you have feelings for is always a major event.

"My apologies, but—would you happen to be Hiyori-san's father?"

"Oh, no—I'm Yokozawa, a workplace subordinate of her father's, here to help out with the preparations today. And you would be..." Granted, that wasn't an *entirely* accurate description of their relationship, but he had no reason to go into details with these people.

The young man seemed to be well-attired, with a rather serious appearance; and while he looked like a competent adult, Yokozawa had already come out here to receive them, so he needed to take the time to confirm just who these people were.

"Please excuse the sudden intrusion. I'm this boy's uncle. I live on the third floor of this building. Here's my license, if you'd like to see." On the card was clearly printed the name IOKAWA and an address for this very apartment complex, and a quick glance at the birthdate showed that he was about the same age as Yokozawa.

"How polite; thank you very much. So, how can we help you...?"

"Actually—my nephew couldn't bring himself to come up here alone, so I'm only here accompanying him."

"Hey, don't tell him *everything*!"

"Then *you* tell him what you're here for. You're the one who was begging someone to come with you." At his uncle's rebuttal, the boy grew silent, at a loss for words—but shortly, he recovered and turned to Yokozawa, seeming to have at last prepared himself.

After taking a deep breath, he spoke words that sounded as if they'd been rehearsed. "I—I came to give Kirishima-san...I mean, *Hiyori-san* a birthday present!"

Given the boy's stiff expression and the complicated wrapping job, Yokozawa concluded that this wasn't a joke or simple prank. He and Kirishima had toyed with the idea of what might happen if, one day, Hiyori found herself a boyfriend, but perhaps that day wasn't so far off as they'd imagined after all...

One day was only going to get closer and closer to *right now*, and while Yokozawa had imagined he'd only feel irritation and displeasure when boys came along

wanting to woo Hiyori, he actually found himself feeling...admiration. It must've taken this kid a hell of a lot of guts to come all the way to her house like this, and moreover, it made Yokozawa feel *proud* of Hiyori, that there was someone like this who felt so strongly for her.

"Was this...a bad time...?"

"Oh—no, no that's not it. Wait right here—I'll go call her over." He slipped back inside for a moment and called out to Hiyori, who'd been checking over the roses she'd just received from Kirishima to ensure they were properly balanced where she'd placed them. "Hiyo—got a second?"

"What is it~?"

"There's a kid here with a present for you—what should we do? He's not one of the party guests."

"For me? It's not Yuki-chan or the others?" At Yokozawa's question, she tilted her head—very obviously unable to fathom just who it could be.

"Yeah—a boy from your class named 'Iokawa', it seems."

"Eh? Iokawa-kun? Wonder what he wants... I'll go see!" And when she darted out of the entryway to greet them, the Iokawa boy flushed like a boiled octopus—but given that they seemed to be on decent terms for the most part, they were able to converse without issue.

Hiyori accepted the present with a bit of embarrassment, but otherwise didn't seem to be all that concerned—suggesting that the boy's feelings were one-sided. His uncle's eyes crinkled from behind his glasses as he fondly gazed upon his nephew's valiant efforts.

"I'm glad to see she accepted the present."

"Indeed."

"Apparently he was so nervous about it, he didn't sleep a wink last night."

While Yokozawa stood there conversing with Iokawa, Kirishima poked his head, still dripping from the shower, out into the entrance area, likely curious as to where Yokozawa and Hiyori had gone off to. "What's going on, Yokozawa?"

“Ah—a classmate of Hiyori’s brought by a birthday present for her, and this young man accompanied him—”

“I’m his uncle, Iokawa. I’m so sorry to barge in all of a sudden like this.” He ducked his head again politely.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Hiyori’s father. My apologies as well for not introducing myself sooner. I’ve been rather busy, you see.” Kirishima extended a hand, gripping Iokawa’s in his own. He was likely on his best behavior, seeing as he was speaking to the guardian of one of his daughter’s classmates.

“I’m sorry we’ve caused such a fuss like this, and on your day-off, too.”

“Not at all—my daughter appears to be enjoying it, after all.”

“I’m please to hear as such. I mentioned this to Yokozawa-san just now, but I’m living on the third floor of this complex. Rude as it may be to take this opportunity to say so—but I hope we can remain close from now on.”

“Is that so? Then I also hope we can get along.” They then settled into idle chatting, Kirishima’s smile not wavering an inch.

Hiyori finished up her conversation after a bit longer, bidding Iokawa farewell with *See you next semester!* And after they’d headed back into the genkan and made sure the door was shut, Yokozawa asked what he’d been wondering, unable to keep it to himself despite feeling it rude to bring up. “So...who was that kid?”

“He said it was because I’m always taking care of him. Probably because I always help him with stuff he doesn’t understand in class?”

“Huh... So you sit near each other?”

“Yup! He’s right beside me. I’m gonna go put this up in my room!”

It seemed the boy hadn’t been able to clearly get across his feelings for her. He’d probably been trying his hardest, too—but Hiyori was open and honest and never looked for hidden meanings in people’s words, and it wasn’t really clear whether or not that had worked out for the best for young Iokawa.

Checking to make sure Hiyori was in her room, he voiced his thoughts: “Doesn’t look like she feels anything for him, huh.”

“Nope.”

“...What’re you getting all moody about? There’s no point in being jealous over *that*.”

“I’m not jealous over the kid.” Which meant his behavior was because of the *uncle*.

“You... Don’t go getting jealous over the *guardian of your daughter’s classmate*.” He’d *thought* Kirishima had been unnecessarily chatty with the guy earlier—and this seemed to be the reason. But as he stood there, dumbfounded at the reaction—Kirishima went and pushed the blame onto Yokozawa himself.

“S your fault for making that kind of face around him.”

“You’re such a *child*. It was a perfectly normal expression.” If he’d seemed particularly happy, it had been for no more reason than putting on a good face for the sake of Hiyori’s interaction with the Iokawas. He was just a random guy—not even family—hanging around the Kirishimas’ house on a weekend; he couldn’t be *rude* to them.

“Hardly; you were nicer than you *ever* are at work.”

“What the hell are you going on about? I wasn’t *nearly* as bad as *you* were with him!” And finding Kirishima’s sullen expression far too amusing, he let out a loud laugh.

~THE END~